

# MONTANA

*the magazine of western history*

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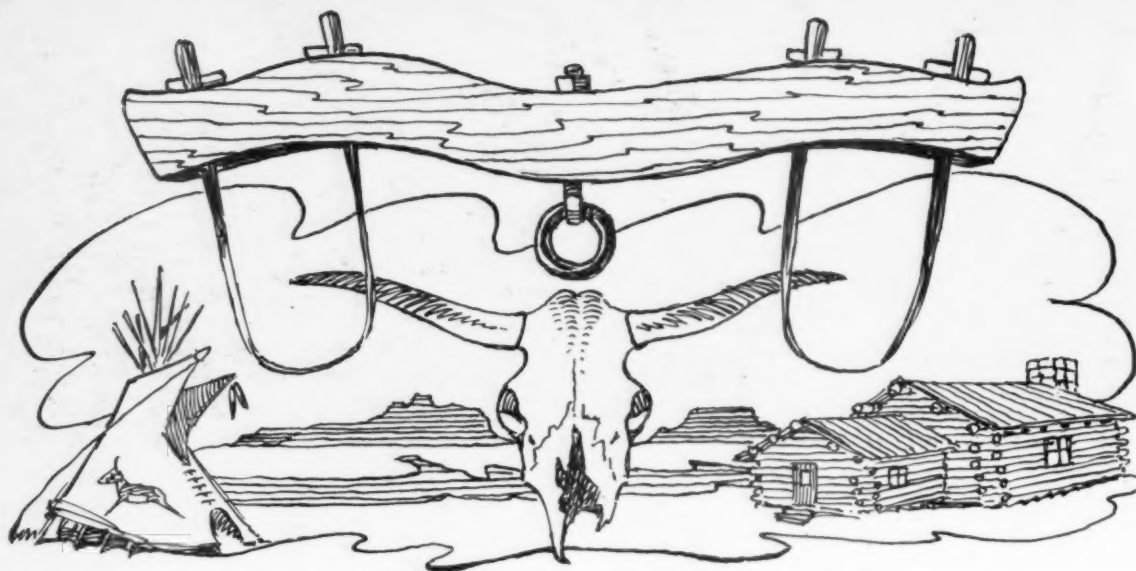
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INDIAN HUNTER'S RETURN, by Charles M. Russell, from the original oil painted in 1900.

WINTER, 1958

Great Plains Issue



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Volume Eight  
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## GREAT PLAINS ISSUE

- The West and The Desert.....Walter Prescott Webb 2  
All other problems of the Great Plains are dwarfed by the fact of aridity.
- The Great Plains in Historical Perspective.....Robert G. Athearn 13  
A cold evaluation of fact indicates that the first explorers were right.
- Pliant Prairie: One plant's influence on one State.....John T. Schlebecker 30  
A microcosmic study of South Dakota establishes some startling evidence.
- The Great Plains, Voiceless Region.....Carl F. Kraenzel 42  
A dynamic, twentieth century approach to the complex problems of the region.
- An Act to Establish A Great Plains Administration ..... 50  
A synthesis of pertinent language in the new Federal Legislation proposed by Senator John Carroll of Colorado.
- Director's Roundup .....K. Ross Toole 62  
It might be better to provide a little foreign aid for the Great Plains even if we have to bleed it away from Tito.
- Reader's Remuda—Roundup of the New Western books.

Edited by Robert G. Athearn 55

*The Charles M. Russell Book* by Harold McCracken, reviewed by Murial Sibell Wolle. *Wovoka, The Indian Messiah* by Paul Bailey, reviewed by Dorothy M. Johnson. *Law West of Fort Smith: A History Of Frontier Justice In The Indian Territory, 1834-1896* by Glenn Shirley, reviewed by Clifford P. Westermeier. *Stirrup High* by Walt Coburn, reviewed by A. B. Guthrie, Jr. *Three Years Among The Comanches: The Narrative of Nelson Lee, The Texas Ranger*, with introduction by Walter Prescott Webb, reviewed by Joe B. Frantz. *The Best Of The American Cowboy*, edited by Ramon F. Adams, reviewed by Gene M. Gressley. *Empire Of The Columbia* by Dorothy O. Johansen and Charles M. Gates, reviewed by Arthur L. Throckmorton. *Is the West A State of Mind?*—a brief commentary by best-selling Montana Novelist, Dan Cushman.

Indian Hunter's Return.....Cover painting by Charles M. Russell

**ABOUT THE COVER.** *Indian Hunter's Return* by Charles M. Russell, 1900. All of the excitement and elation felt in a mid-winter Plains Indian camp is skillfully portrayed here. Much of the detailed, authentic information documented here was gained by the artist during a winter sojourn with the Blood Indians in Canada. The meat is buffalo, the Indian's "staff of life." From the original in the Mackay collection, C. M. Russell Room, Historical Society of Montana, Helena.



All other problems of the Great Plains are dwarfed by the fact  
of aridity.

## The West and The Desert

By Walter Prescott Webb

*"From the 98th meridian west to the Rocky Mountains there is a stretch of country whose history is filled with more tragedy, and whose future is pregnant with greater promise than perhaps any other equal expanse of territory."—THE AMERICAN FARMER by A. M. Simons.*

*"In regard to this extensive section of the country, I do not hesitate in giving the opinion, that it is almost wholly unfit for cultivation, and of course uninhabitable by a people depending upon agriculture for their subsistence."—Major Stephen H. Long, U. S. Army Engineers (about 1820).*



In the May issue of *Harper's Magazine*, 1957, I published an article under the title of "The American West—Perpetual Mirage." That article stirred up the biggest furor of anything I have ever written about the West, and I have been writing about it for more than thirty years. When the editor of this magazine requested me to write something for the Great Plains issue, I suggested that he permit me to re-examine the West in the light of the Westerner's reaction to the Harper article. I hope the readers will observe that I said "in the light of" rather than in the heat of the reaction. The heat was considerable, but I shall ignore it; above all I want to make clear that this is no attempt to have the last word with those who criticized what I said in *Harper's*. I trust that those editors and individuals who were irritated or outraged by my previous effort will look at this one with the calmness to disagree without being too disagreeable.

Here I shall undertake to restate the general thesis developed in *Harper's*, summarize the Westerner's reaction as expressed in newspaper editorials and in letters, and examine the scholars' opinion as set forth in serious books and monographs. In conclusion I shall try to strike a balance in the hope that all of us may have a better understanding of the country in which we live.

#### I. What I said in *Harper's*

My purpose in writing "The American West—Perpetual Mirage," was to put on paper what I thought to be a basic truth about the western half of this country. It seemed to me that the idea I had, threw a great deal of light on the nature of the West, explained why it is a section apart from the rest of the country, and made clear why it has a set of special problems which call for special solutions. In short, it made the differences in the needs and compulsions of the West understandable.

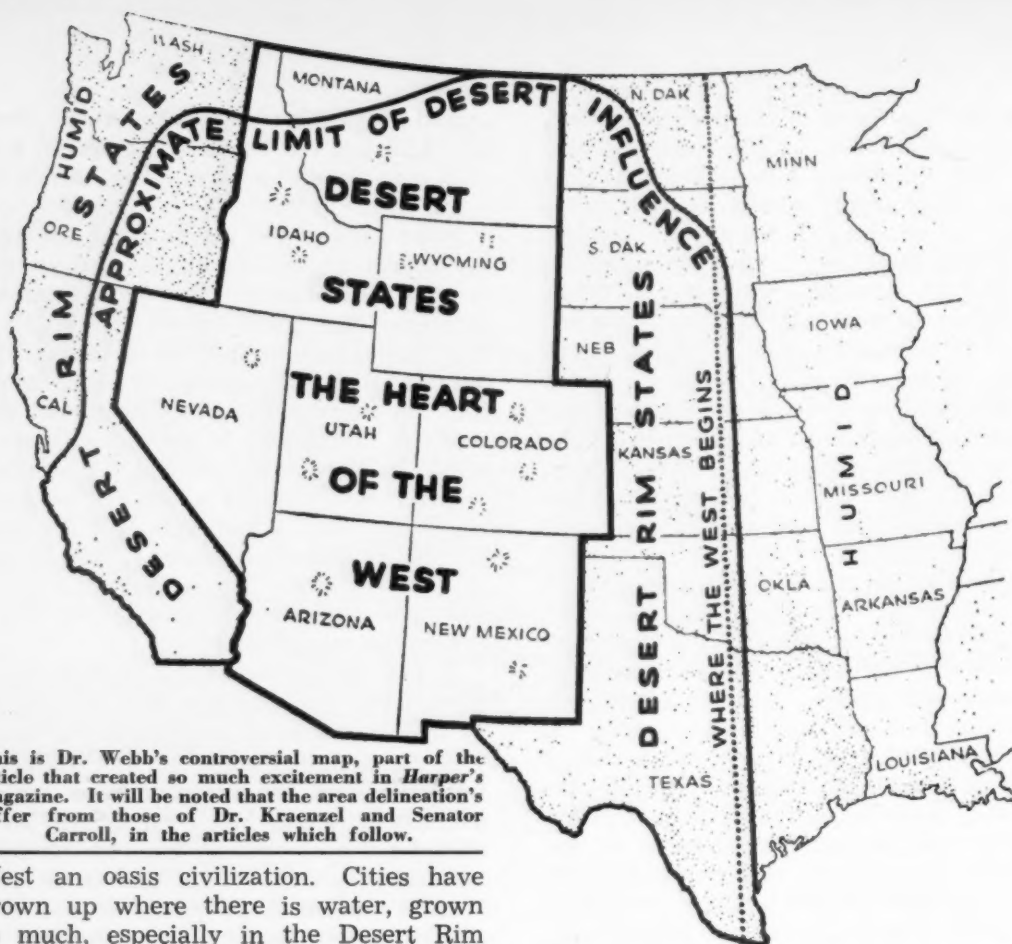
The basic idea was this: *At the heart of the American West lies a vast desert of varying intensity.* It covers all or a considerable part of eight states, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, Wyoming, Colorado, Idaho, and Montana. These states I called the Desert States. The six states to the east and the three to the west I called

Desert Rim States because they form the right and left flank of the desert, and each has desert or semi-desert areas of considerable extent.

What I undertook was to make the desert appear as the center piece, the most prominent feature of that vast country. Other regions—the North and the South—have mountains, or prairies or plains, but only the West has a desert. It is the factor that has no counterpart elsewhere in the country. Therefore, if we would understand the West, we must begin where the desert is most intense and work outward to the rim, asking ourselves how far does the desert influence extend? How much of that influence is felt *here* in West Texas, in Southern California, in Eastern Oregon, or Washington?

It is extremely difficult to change the focus with which people are accustomed to viewing their history or their land. The conventional view of the West is from the East, the direction from which the viewers approached it. The West should not be looked at from the outside, but from the inside, from the center. The West is concentric, a series of moister circles extending outward from the arid to the semi-arid, to the subhumid and finally to the humid land. If one will take this view, he will see that the desert is the dominant force in shaping, conditioning, or determining much that lies within its sphere of aridity. The drought that invades the Rim States is the breath of the desert which is all drought; the fertile irrigation valleys are what they are because the desert influence has made ordinary farming too hazardous or impossible. The Great Plains to the east of the mountains are the burnt right flank of the desert. The forests have fled to the mountain tops to escape the desert in the valleys. Once the desert is recognized and accepted as the dominant force in the West, what goes on there among animals, plants, and men makes sense.

It is the desert influence that makes water more important than land in the West. There is an abundance of land, much of it unoccupied because of the scarcity of water. People have collected where the water is, and are making the



This is Dr. Webb's controversial map, part of the article that created so much excitement in *Harper's* magazine. It will be noted that the area delineation's differ from those of Dr. Kraenzel and Senator Carroll, in the articles which follow.

West an oasis civilization. Cities have grown up where there is water, grown so much, especially in the Desert Rim States, that they are pushing hard on the water supply and many of them are approaching limitations imposed by the exhaustion of the available supply.

I pointed out that because of the desert influence the West is, when compared to the East, a land of many deficiencies. I made an inventory of the pluses and minuses of the West. I said it is short on water, timber, large cities, national industry, organized labor, and that it has few Negroes. On the plus side the West is long on land, grass, minerals, natural wonders, Indians and orientals. Finally, I said that the West is short on chronology, that its history is brief, a story soon told. I pointed out what the record reveals, that there is as yet no Westerner in the Hall of Fame, not one Westerner out of eighty-six persons there, that only one battle of national importance has ever been fought in any Western state. I called attention to the fact in the *Dictionary of American Biography* the proportion of Westerners is below the proportion of the population,

and that the same is true to a lesser extent of those in *Who's Who*. I was trying to explain why in the standard American histories less than one-tenth of the space deals with the American West, more than fifty per cent of the land area.

Finally, I said that the deficiencies of the West, most of them imposed by the desert influence, affected the activity and the attitude of the people who lived there. Lacking so much that people beyond the desert have, the Westerner tends to magnify what he has, build it up to large proportions, make much of little. This tendency gives the West a bizarre character in the eyes of the man from a humid land.

In saying all of these things, I was trying to show that the desert exerts an influence on everything, on the people, on history itself. Nothing was further from my mind than to malign the West. It is my country. I grew up on the edge of the desert, and have spent my whole adult life trying to understand it.

The anger the article created throughout the West I attributed to two things. People do not like to have their country's deficiencies pointed out. Whatever the country is like, they do not want its faults noticed, and especially by one they consider an outsider.

The second reason for the violent reaction may be attributed to the fact that I used the word desert when I might have used softer terms such as arid, semi-arid, and sub-humid. These soft words might have turned away a considerable amount of wrath, but I chose to use desert and desert influence because I wanted to drive the central idea home. I wanted the reader to see the desert as a real factor in the Westerner's life. Once they see this, I thought, they will be better prepared to cope with the problems that they cannot escape. Let us now turn to the Westerners' response.

## II. What the Westerners Said

The public comment on the desert thesis was not long in coming. It falls into two categories, editorial comment and personal letters to the author or publisher. In most cases I shall give the source of the newspaper and editorial comment and of the senatorial comment, but I shall not give the name of the persons who wrote me privately.

Apparently the editors realized that here they had a splendid opportunity to come out in defense of their own country. Professors are not too popular anyway, and now one had been caught in the act of maligning or misrepresenting the country they all loved. A desert indeed! That could be accepted, but this misguided author had gone on to abuse the people, to say that they were backward, that they couldn't make the D. A. B. or *Who's Who* in respectable numbers.

*The Denver Post* took the lead in the attack. On Sunday, April 28, appeared a full page editorial entitled "Us Desert Rats is Doing OKay." The first sentence reads:

Listen, Dr. Walter Prescott Webb, historian of the University of Texas, you better take off your glasses and your Ph. D. You've picked yourself a fight.

That sentence sets the tone of the whole piece, and nowhere in it does the writer rise far above an emotional appeal to the prejudice of the reader towards a critic of his country. This editorial was distributed widely over the country. A few days after it appeared a reporter on the paper called by long distance for a thirty minute conversation. He was a very courteous gentleman who had a job to do and I shall not dwell on our discourse.

"Do you think Denver is in the desert?" he asked.

"You would be if it were not for the elevation," I said. "Does Denver have a water problem?" I asked.

"It sure does!"

We wound up talking a little about what to do with Denver's water problem.

*The Cut Bank Pioneer Press* of May 2, in a long editorial entitled "The Professor Dogmatically Defines the Western Desert" does not want Montana included in the desert states. "There is a western desert but Montana isn't a part of it." There is a section of Montana west of the mountains that enjoys the climate, the rain and the fog of the Pacific Northwest, but the eastern two-thirds of the state is pretty dry. The average annual rainfall, the author says, is 14.59 inches which puts the entire state in the semi-arid class. The great wheat production cited by the author is possible because of new strains of wheat introduced from other desert countries and to comparatively new methods of dry farming evolved in the American West for lands of deficient moisture.

Conceding that Montana is not a desert, it is in great part subject to desert influence. "We are aware," says the author, "that east of the continental divide there are adverse cycles occurring around periods of seven years." Montana is very fortunate in having a large oasis west of the continental divide, and in this and in its cooler climate, it differs from some of the other desert states.

*The Phoenix Gazette*, April 30, entitles its editorial "An Insult to Arizona and the West." The author thinks that "Webb has a grudge against the West," that "Webb has spent too many years in cloistered academic halls," that his hypothesis is not





These two historic views are of railroad building—which helped open the Great Plains to settlement—in Webb's definition of "Desert Rim" states. Above, an advanced construction crew of the Kansas Pacific R.R., in the vicinity of Coyote, many miles north of famed Dodge City. P. 7, building of the Missouri Pacific. These excellent documentaries, from the archives of the Union Pacific Railroad, leave little doubt as to the aridity of the region.

very original, that he distorts his evidence, that Arizona has the largest Ponderosa pine forest in the nation, that Webb ignores the great growth of Arizona and other Western states in the past decade. If all the above statements were true, and some of them are, the fact should not blind the editor to the fact that the desert influence is dominant throughout the West, that he is in the heart of it, and that the name of the state is an abbreviation of the Spanish *arida zona*, the arid zone. Surely the influence so powerful in Arizona is not limited to that state.

*The Salt Lake City Tribune*, May 13, sounded a unique note in a lead editorial, "West Would Do Well to Examine Its Mirage!" The editor thinks I covered too much territory, that I am an unorthodox historian, that I erred in saying that the desert is rarely mentioned in Western newspapers and "never by Chambers of Commerce," and that the standard of selection used by *Who's Who* should be critically examined. But of the views expressed he says:

"This (article) is no 'pot-boiler.'"

"The author is on solid ground with his fundamental idea that the West has been shaped, historically and economically, by the great desert at its heart. This should be more widely recognized by every resident of the West . . .

"The author reports correctly that the 'oasis' cities of the West are plagued by water shortages, . . . but the problem is not confined to this region . . .

"Dr. Webb drew the most fire with his complaint that the West isn't producing its share of 'persons of distinction' . . .

"There is danger, we believe, in becoming unduly apoplectic or unnecessarily flippant about unfavorable references to this beloved region of ours. It could be that the critic has pointed out soft spots that need hardening."

Because the people of Salt Lake City and Utah know of the desert, and have made the wisest use of it, I could wish no better for the West than that the other states would profit by Utah's example.

The senators in Washington could not resist the temptation to join in the chase. The article and some of the editorial comment were inserted in the Congressional Record. *The Christian Science Monitor's* Roscoe Fleming made the following report of this phase.

"Senator Gordon Allott (R) of Colorado . . . said that Dr. Webb really ought to travel the West and get acquainted with it. Senator Wallace F. Bennett (R) of Utah pointed out that a study of the birthplaces listed in 'Who's Who' and 'American Men of Science' showed that per capita Utah led all the rest, with



Idaho fourth, Colorado fifth, and Wyoming sixth. He did not, however, point out that their present addresses show that most of them had to leave home to make careers.

"Senator Barry M. Goldwater (R) of Arizona said that the West is young, but that one college in Texas furnished more officers in World War II than either the United States Naval or Military Academy. Meanwhile, these and other congressmen from the West put many a protesting editorial into the Congressional Record." At least one of the senators admitted that he made his remarks before he read the article.

The personal letters fell into two categories, far removed from one another. An anonymous picture post card from Denver said: "If you don't like the West why don't you get out of it? Or is it because you couldn't make good with all those illustrious Easterners? As for 'Who's Who' why pay a bunch of guys to pass judgment on you? I have 3 in one family who could be in the damn book but why pay to see your name in print? I'd sign this

but I'm afraid a bird like you might put this in Harper's. Better get back East. Might add, I haven't seen your name in Who's Who." Another writer declared that he wanted to come to Austin "to spit on your building." He took exception to the statement that there were comparatively few Negroes in the West, and assumed that I thought this one of the West's deficiencies. I was only trying to account for the brevity of Western history, pointing out that there was no Negro problem in the West for the historians to write about.

The publicity director of a chamber of commerce in Arizona sent out a five page mimeographed letter addressed to the editor. He sent a copy to me with a note in which he said: "You will understand that I have something of a reputation for being a snide, sarcastic character." I could not give him much of an argument on the sarcastic part.

A letter from Denver reads:

"Yes, . . . you accomplished one thing: you got westerners, such as I, to a point where they'd like nothing better than to



use you for target practice. I was not provoked by the Commission of certain facts to your article as much as I was by the omission of others and the further twisting of what you did put down . . .

"What are you trying to do? Create some new kind of national tension? Northerners will half seriously speak of how Southerners still rehash the Civil War. You apparently are making a colossal experiment here with some sort of 'East-show-up-the-West' rift in mind . . ."

"You simply wrote your dissertation thirty years too soon, sir. The West is still a frontier with unlimited possibilities and challenge for those with the vision to see it. The East offers little that is comparable."

Maybe I drove the desert idea too hard, but my only purpose was to get the Westerner to see what is all around him. It was not intended to create tension, but to establish harmony between an environment and those who live in it as I do.

The second class of letters came from men who have seen the West whole, either literary men or scientists who have been in government service. The following is from a distinguished writer, a man who loves the desert and will not live far from it, preferably in it.

"We have both read your desert piece . . . with great interest, and, as old desert dwellers, go along with it heartily. It could do a lot to mitigate some really dangerous social and economic illusions in the West, and about the West, if only enough would see this central fact, admit that we're not a garden merely awaiting the right year to bloom. But I fear the C. of C. mind is incorrigible. To them numbers are the proof of 'progress' and will be till we all die of thirst. You should have heard me get jumped on some years ago for saying that the water table under ..... had dropped fifteen feet, and that if the town didn't stop expanding, it was going to stop altogether. A mere incontestable and irreversible fact of nature cannot be allowed to dry out their optimism."

Another resident, not content with the trouble I had stirred up, wanted me to make a study of the social and economic results of the West's desert civilization.

He thinks it develops a predatory spirit. "Grubbing for a living in such an arid civilization," he said, "has made the law of the fang and the claw the basis of both its social and economic life. Or as Westerners themselves phrase it, We spend three months of the year 'taking' the tourists, the other nine months, 'taking' each other." I thank the gentleman for his suggestion, but must decline this study.

A retired member of the U.S.D.A. marveled at "your temerity to develop the idea in the face of glowering chambers of commerce." In reference to agricultural conferences he held throughout the country years ago, he said: "I kept a pinchart of the members . . . , and it was amazing how the rainfall lines showed up . . . The biggest Western group came from the tier of universities in Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Texas. There was a thinner series to the west of that, the Dakotas, Kansas, and Nebraska, but from there on west there was practically nothing until one reached the Pacific coast . . . The water laws of the Western states tell the story, with riparian and prior rights fighting it out. They are having stiff battles right now here (California) between the northern and southern parts of the state."

From a man who has spent his life in conservation work, mainly in connection with forestry, comes expert information on the water problem of the West.

"I . . . relate it (the article) to the conservation of natural resources, and the tremendous shift in emphasis over the years—increasing emphasis on watershed management—the increasing importance of recreation including fish and wildlife. Few recognize the results of devastation by fire, overgrazing, and destructive removal of timber . . . Few realize that soils exposed by overgrazing, with their higher temperatures, greater ground wind movement, evaporation and soil compaction . . . reduce the beneficial effects of precipitation . . . The Forest Service has protected plots in the Wasatch Mountains over forty years . . . [but] the vegetal cover is no greater than when the plots were established. Maybe it will take a drought such as the one that put the

Too many people think of the West in terms of lush mountain meadows and forest-carpeted areas they have seen and enjoyed, such as this early huckleberry meadow photo in present Glacier Park, Montana. They close their minds to the much greater desert or sub-desert areas.

Pueblos out of business in the late 1200's to bring a realization of the importance of maintaining the balance . . . I wish your article could be read—and its implications understood—by more people . . . *Harpers* is read by the so-called intellectuals, so maybe it will do more good where it is."

In reference to the burden on water in the West, the writer says: "As I have it about 15 per cent of the land west of about the 100th meridian has to furnish all the water for irrigation, industry, municipalities, and other uses. And only the high mountains where snowfall and other precipitation exceed twenty inches is capable of supplying runoff to feed the streams and underground supplies. Water is the limiting factor."

In this connection, Roscoe Fleming in *Christian Science Monitor*, May 21, quoted the following from a speech Bernard DeVoto made when he was awarded an honorary degree by the University of Colorado in 1948.

Speaking at Boulder DeVoto said:

"We are desert-dwellers. The West is a desert. A human society more complex than that of small migratory herders of sheep and cattle . . . is possible only because of the snow that falls upon our peaks.

"We can meet here today, there are lawns on this campus, there is a University of Colorado, there is Boulder, there is Denver, only because the stone fingers of the Rockies reach up to catch and hold the snow . . .

"The West is a desert, and we have told ourselves, and the . . . world that we have made the desert blossom as the rose. We have told the truth. But we would be wise to remember every moment that roses also blossomed in Mesopotamia and Syria and Tunis and Ur of Chaldees—and they are desert wastes now."

I wish to close this section on Westerners' reaction by quoting from a letter



that touched me deeply. In the Harper article I was pretty severe on the society that has grown up in the Nevada desert. The writer of this letter is a successful business man who lives in one of the leading cities.

"I thought," he wrote, "you might be tolerantly amused by the enclosed clipping . . . an outgrowth of your article . . . I, myself . . . enjoyed this article . . . and thought it very reasoned—perhaps too true. Nevertheless, I enjoy this country too much to get up and get out. I imagine you're happy to remain in Texas, too.

"You were quite harsh on Nevada, and it did hurt a little. Those of us who have been here several years, enjoying its climate, its beauty nestled up against the mighty hills, its hometown atmosphere . . . we are apt to forget that these things won't be what is noticed by the first-time, or casual visitor. Many of us are blind to the presence of the gambling and the heart-break of too easy divorce and too easy marriage, having made our adjustments . . . separate from these elements. We shall be content to live here perpetually, in enjoyment of relaxed lives amidst nature's grandeur, enjoying good climate and reasonably sparse population . . ."

"It is hoped that you can see your way to visit—not so that you will reverse your thinking, but so that you can see some of





Where water can be obtained or diverted it does make the desert bloom. This expensive irrigation facility was built by Albert B. Fall on his vast Three Rivers Rancho near Tularosa, New Mexico, many years ago.

its beauties and advantages, forgetting, on this search, what every other non-Nevadan too readily sees."

This was one of the letters I answered. I shall quote a part of that answer in the conclusion of this article, quote it because I owed this civilized man a justification.

### III. What The Scholars Have Said

The American people have developed to a high degree their gift for ignoring the scholar, and there is no better illustration of this than the West furnishes in reference to its environment. Space does not permit me to cite the opinions of such explorers as Lewis and Clark, Pike and Long; of such statesmen or politicians as Daniel Webster and Jefferson Davis; of such scholars as John Wesley Powell and Willard D. Johnson. All of these men wrote or spoke about the special problems of the arid and semi-arid West. Most of them conceded the desert influence, one of them made a map of it and that map appeared with modifications in textbooks until after the Civil War.

We need not go back to these early findings. Let us inquire what the statesmen and the scholars have done quite recently. We will examine the work of three men, Senator John Carroll of Colorado, Professor Carl Kraenzel of Montana, and Professor Edmund C. Jaeger of California.

Senator John Carroll introduced a bill in the last session of Congress entitled "The Great Plains Administration Act." The Great Plains Administration, to be directed by five men, would be concerned with the special problems in designated portions of ten states, Colorado, Kansas, Montana, Wyoming, Oklahoma, Nebraska, South Dakota, North Dakota, New Mexico, and Texas.

Section 3 of this bill reads in part: "The Congress hereby finds . . . the Great Plains region has distinctive characteristics in respect of climate, topography, and resource use which are substantially different from those prevailing in adjacent regions, and which are particularly marked by alternating extremes of flood and drought."

Article 8 states that "The Administration shall give first priority to the development of plans and programs for relief from, and alleviation of, flood damage and drought conditions recently sustained or now prevailing in the region and for the prevention and control of damage from floods and drought in the future. It shall submit plans to Congress for emergency flood and drought relief at the earliest possible date . . ."

Senator Carroll is attempting here what Franklin D. Roosevelt did in 1938 when he designated the South as the "Economic Problem No. 1 of the Nation," and instructed the National Emergency Council to "do something about it." It is difficult for this writer to understand why Senator Carroll excluded the rest of the states that fall under the influence of the desert. The problems he proposes to deal with in the Great Plains Administration are common to parts of all the seventeen states of the American West. Senator Carroll is addressing himself only to the right flank of the desert.

The second recent study to be noticed is Professor Carl F. Kraenzel's *The Great Plains in Transition*. This is a sociological study of the ten Great Plains states. The author feels that the region suffers because the people came equipped with eastern ideas and institutions and have not yet made the necessary adjustments for living in a semi-arid region.

"The need," he says, "is for the people to make certain adjustments and adaptations to the fact of semiaridity. Otherwise the majority . . . must leave the region, and the few who remain will have one of



In order to make fruitful 650,000 acres of Three Rivers Rancho, it is reputed that Sec. of Interior A. B. Fall expended some \$404,000 of Teapot Dome money on such irrigation facilities as this.

two choices—to live a feast-and-famine . . . existence or to have . . . a standard of living . . . lower than most other parts of the nation.” If the necessary adaptations to semiaridity are not made, the author believes, the region will decline, the nation will suffer the loss of food and fiber and “will have a poverty area on its hands, with a demand for repeated welfare programs and services.” Senator Carroll’s Great Plains Administration seems designed to carry out the program that Kraenzel suggests.

Kraenzel develops a most interesting concept which he calls “Space as A Social Cost.” In the simplest terms his idea is that people live too far apart to have in a high degree the ordinary amenities of civilization. Space makes social relations too difficult and commodities too dear. I saw this illustrated in Montana in 1956 when the people were complaining that they paid more for gasoline than any state in the Union. The oil companies were trying to explain this high cost in pamphlets distributed through filling stations. Their main argument was that gasoline was high because they had to haul it so far and had so few customers—the cost of space.

As for the desert in the West, I am willing to rest the case on Professor Edmund C. Jaeger’s *The North American Deserts*. It bears a 1957 copyright and is an invaluable contribution to anyone who wishes to understand the American West. The author will not offend the most sensitive because he is a scientist, a biologist, and confines his study to the land, the animals, and the plants, with only passing notice of the influence of the desert on human life and human institutions.

Taking the continent as his field, Professor Jaeger names five deserts, locates them and provides a map of each. They are the Chihuahuan, the Sonoran, the Mohavan, the Great Basin, and the Navaho or Painted Deserts. Two of these deserts, the Chihuahuan and the Sonoran, lie partly in Mexico and partly in the United States. Three of them lie wholly



within this country. Altogether they extend into all the states shown on my map except Montana, and into some of the Rim states, notably Texas and California. They blanket Arizona, New Mexico, and Nevada almost completely. Since the author confines the desert to regions having not more than ten inches of rainfall, he takes no account of the surrounding semiarid country which feels the desert influence.

He says something significant in the first sentence: “Nearly one-fifth of the surface of the earth is made up of deserts supporting less than four per cent of the world’s population.” Those who believe that the *real* deserts are found only in other countries should ponder this: “Nowhere in the world is there as great a concentration of different types of desert climate as in western North America.” The Great Basin desert is similar to deserts and steppes of interior Asia; Nevada and Utah are like the Russian deserts around the Aral Sea; Wyoming and Montana in certain parts resemble the Gobi; the Mohave is like the Algerian Sahara; the Chihuahuan around El Paso compares with the Karoo in South Africa and the Riverina district of Australia; and the Arizona Upland around Tucson finds its analogue in the Kalahari of South Africa and in the Mendoza oasis desert country of western Argentina.

“All in all,” concludes the author, “one who has an intimate knowledge of all parts of the North American deserts will have a good understanding of desert climates in most parts of the earth.” Professor Jaeger’s book has opened the way for a better understanding of the American West. I would like to suggest that

Congress or one of the foundations create a committee to make a comparative study of the deserts of the world in order to learn how we may best solve the problems pertaining to the American West.

#### IV. A Word to the Westerners

To those who were offended by what I said in *Harper's* I wish to state a few facts about myself and make some final observations about the desert thesis.

I am not an easterner, but grew up in West Texas on the edge of the desert. For forty years I have been a member of the faculty at the University of Texas, and my whole life here has been spent in studying the American West and the frontier. I have traveled extensively in the West because I love the wild grandeur of the country, its mysteries, its extremes of topography and climate. During the summer of 1955 I spent a good deal of time in the southern desert states, and in the summer of 1956 I did what few people do, drove the north-south stretch of it from the Canadian to the Mexican border. Day after day I traveled south, through the Great Basin, through the Navaho or Painted desert, into the Chihuahuan and Sonoran, and all the time I asked myself the question: What gives the West its special character? It has its plains, its mountains and its slopes to the sea, but none of these is common to the entire region. The thing that binds all together is the great deficiency of moisture. At the heart is the desert, on the right flank the plains and on the left flank the slopes to the sea. The desert exerts a powerful influence at the center and it exerts some influence east and west, on the flanks. The desert emerged in my consciousness on this trip, and I saw the West as I had never seen it before, its unity and its special problems. I felt at last that I really understood my own country.

I put what I saw on paper and what I put down was published. It was not my purpose to offend, though I realized that people do not like to believe that they live in a desert country. I did try to be clear, to make the desert stand out boldly on the Western intellectual landscape. I used simple words, not weasel words, and

I designed a pictorial map in which the desert region was made the most prominent part. I wanted to change the focus of the West from the edge to the center where the greatest force exists in greatest intensity.

To those Westerners who deny the desert I wish to submit a series of questions by which they may judge whether its influence reaches them:

1. Has your country recently been affected by drought?

2. Is there within fifty miles of your home, land too dry to be cultivated without irrigation?

3. Does the city in or near which you live have a serious water problem?

4. Is there any arable land within fifty miles of your home that could be productive if there were water for irrigation?

5. Do you watch with anxiety the clouds that seem to promise rain?

6. Is the surface water supply you have, furnished by mountains that rise at least 5,000 feet?

7. Does the sound of rain on the roof affect you emotionally, make your heart come in your throat, make you want to go out in it as an expression of your thankfulness?

8. Does bank credit loosen up in your town after a rain?

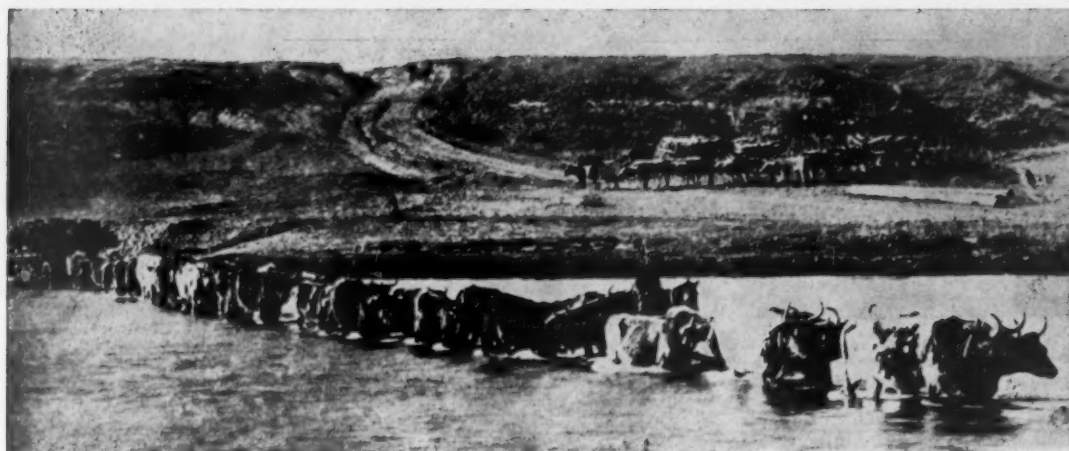
9. Have the people in your state ever prayed for rain?

10. Have people in your state ever raised funds for artificial rainmaking either by explosives or chemicals?

If you answer seven of these questions in the affirmative, then you are subject to desert influence. If you answer all of them in the negative, the desert need be of no concern to you.

I wish to close by quoting from my letter to the gentleman from Nevada: "I could write quite an essay on the character of the people of the West, their courage, their friendliness, their integrity. They make up for many of the shortcomings of the land. They have the adventurous spirit, have to have it. If I have forfeited their friendship, it is a matter of deep regret. My purpose was to help them understand their country and themselves."

MONTANA the magazine of western history



Rivers and streams, such as they were, were the only redeeming features for early explorers and pioneers crossing the Great Plains. Water routes for the overland travellers were vital, as Dr. Athearn cites many times in the article which follows. Union Pacific Photo.

## The Great Plains in Historical Perspective

By Robert G. Athearn

What has been known variously as the "Desert Theory" or the "Desert Myth," depending upon who was using it, gained its first national notice from the report of Lieutenant Zebulon Montgomery Pike who trudged westward in the latter part of 1806 toward the peak that bears his name. After crossing the high plains, and fighting the blowing, stinging blasts of sand for endless barren miles, he predicted that the region might "become in time as celebrated as the sandy deserts of Africa." A few years later, in 1820, Major Stephen Long covered much of the same country on the way to a mountain of his own. Both he and Dr. Edwin James, a botanist in the party, agreed that the country was unfit for cultivation and not suited for an agricultural people. It was a land of "hopeless and irreclaimable sterility," in the words of the botanist. James was even puzzled at the presence of animals in such a place. He

wondered what induced them to stay and concluded that man, a higher type of animal, would never fall into the same error. Easterners, some of whom were already worried about the loss of their population in the great westward movement, applauded the sentiment.

Following the Long expedition the government suspended its official explorations of the plains until the 1840's when some of the mountain men, Kit Carson among them, escorted Major John Fremont on enough guided tours to win for him the name "Pathfinder." Meanwhile a number of privately supported investigators took a look and made judgments of their own. In 1832, John B. Wyeth crossed the plains en route to Oregon (and anticipated Professor Webb) when he made the statement that this strip of land lacked two all-important elements: wood and water. Rivers like the Platte, shallow, unnavigable and





Despite the wailing of pessimists, the American star was on the rise, and resolute pioneers ventured West "come hell or high water." Typical of the Great Plains settlements was Hays, in west Kansas, at a time when buffalo chips still dotted the prairie. Note the short, but dense, tough cover of the original grass in foreground. Union Pacific Photo.

generally miserable, moved toward the sea, as Wyeth put it, without "enlivening or fructifying this desert."

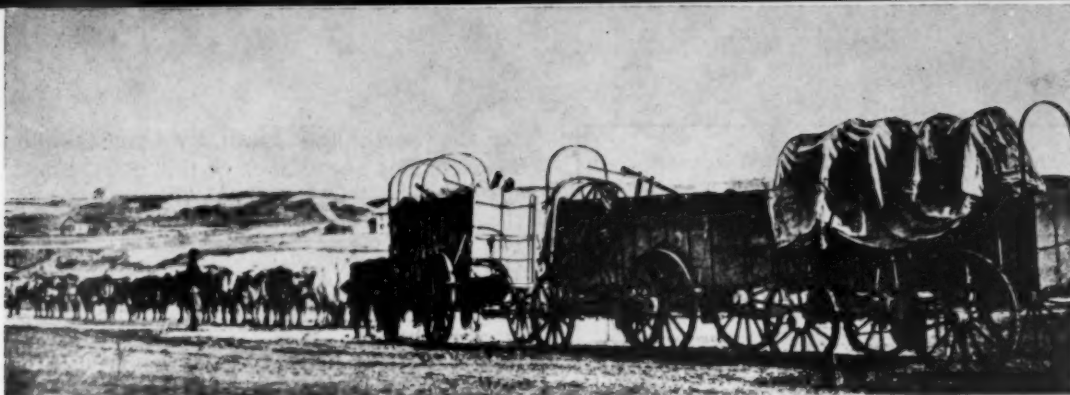
There were those who disagreed with this early assessment, just as latter day Westerners complained about the harshness of Dr. Webb's article in *Harper's*. Jacob Fowler crossed present Kansas only a year after Long's travels. He saw it as a rolling land, "no Wheare two steep for the Waggon or the plow," in which rivers like the Arkansas were flanked by trees useful for building or fencing. John D. Hunter, a man who had lived among the Plains Indians for some time, agreed, and predicted that one day the country between the Missouri and the Rockies would support fifty million people. Still another, Reverend Isaac McCoy, came back from explorations in Kansas with a report that stories of timber scarcity were exaggerated. Like the others, he admitted that parts of the area were not suitable for an agricultural population under existing conditions but he too thought that the river valleys held a promise. A fellow cleric, Reverend Samuel Parker, foresaw settlement spreading out from the rivers and the emergence of a solid population. Both he, and Frederick A. Wislizenus, a German doctor who crossed the plains in 1839, discounted the disadvantages of treelessness. Why not plant them, they asked? A hundred years later the New Deal would try, with some success, to follow the suggestion. The lack of timber and the apparent infertility of the soil would not, said the Doctor, effectively bar western settlement. Accurately he pre-

dicted that current tales of western life would, in a hundred years, sound like fairy stories. None of these men were willing to make a sweeping, all-inclusive condemnation of the high plains as an irreclaimable part of America.

But nothing is so hard to lose as a bad reputation. Despite such optimistic opinions as those just described, the term "desert" was unshakeably fastened upon the western plains country. Jefferson had wondered about the worth of the southern plains. Pike, Long and James offered their respective official opinions and the more settled portions of America accepted the assessment. The Woodbridge and Willard geography of 1824 set the notion before the American schoolboy, as did Carey and Lee's *Atlas* of 1827. Michell, in his "Accompaniment to Reference and Distance Map" of 1835 compared our desert to the Sahara and the thesis of the region's sterility appeared in the Bradford *Atlas* of 1838 and Washington Irving's *Astoria*. Greenhow's *History of Oregon* of 1845 carried forward the theme, unblemished and untarnished.

The decade of the 1850's saw nothing official to dispel the desert idea. Army officers, like Captain Randolph B. Marcy and Lieutenant Gouverneur K. Warren, repeated the earlier sentiments of Pike and Long. Marcy called the high plains a barren and desolate waste where "but few small streams greet the eye of the traveler, and these are soon swallowed up by the thirsty sands over which they flow." Warren looked at Dakota country and remarked that "Agricultural settlements





Nor did the harsh pronouncements of "Great American Desert" from such able men as Thomas Jefferson, Maj. Long, Dr. James, John B. Wyeth, Washington Irving and others deter the determined settlers. They moved west in ever-increasing numbers, on foot and horseback, but mostly by unending caravans of creaking, plodding ox and mule trains.

have now nearly reached their western limits on our great plains; the tracts beyond must ever be occupied by a pastoral people, whether civilized or savage."

John Bradbury, a naturalist, had preceded Warren by more than forty years in the Dakota country, and had, in 1811, discounted the claim that the land was worthless for agricultural purposes. He recognized the mental block of the American farmers who thought they had to have an adequate timber supply for fencing and fuel before moving farther west, and he tried to argue that their fears were exaggerated. It did him no good. Farmers of his day, or even those of the 1850's, were not prepared to take the risk while land was still available in more humid areas. It was bad enough to look westward to a country devoid of the familiar resources of timber and adequate rainfall, but when it lacked a system of navigable rivers or railways with which to transport cash crops, the question of the land's fertility was purely academic.

By the mid-Nineteenth century the high plains and Rockies were under an increased white scrutiny, despite desert talk. The legion of '49ers who made their way clear to the coast found that the land enroute was at least passable, something that many of them had wondered about. A decade later the Pike's Peak rush brought a new legion of gold-seekers into the Rockies and these people, too, found the plains perhaps climatically unfriendly, but not always dangerous. Before the Civil War even the agricultural prospectors had

crept up the river valleys toward the 100th meridian, taking up farms, and enjoying some success. There began to emerge a feeling of cautious optimism.

With the surrender at Appomattox the nation again turned its energies to internal development and resumed its westward march. Increased activity in the land beyond the Missouri did not mean that the desert theory was discarded. It was talked of a good deal, for more than a decade after the war, but that did little to stem the flood tide of emigration. Professional frontiersmen long had recognized the hazards of western life, but being men of unflinching optimism they had for generations moved onward, searching out the better and more productive lands. Now, after 1865, they were unwilling to accept the generalization that all the West was sterile, and a host of amateur pioneers were ready to follow them across the Missouri.

Post-Civil War Americans were not afraid that their nation lacked agricultural capabilities. Millions of acres of farm land in the East, the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys, and the South furnished all the foodstuffs that were required. Nor were they concerned about the West's capabilities as the country's granary; instead, they regarded it as a potential mining and grazing area whose mountains and plains might well furnish things unavailable elsewhere. Rather than worrying about what the West could not produce they concerned themselves with what it would yield. If some of the land lacked promise, the remnants were sufficiently large to satisfy national needs for generations to come. It was with

*"For three generations before their initial settlement the northern Great Plains were viewed as part of a Great American Desert. Occupation of the valleys bordering the region in the decade after the Civil War began to dispel the conception of an American Sahara, and subsequent invasion of the semiarid belt by cattlemen and agricultural pioneers further dissipated the notion. Yet the place of farming in the economy of the territory was still undetermined in 1900. The persistent evolution of more optimistic views on the nature of the Plains, far more than the status of their development at the turn of the century, provided basis for the ensuing experiment in cultivation of the benchlands. The dry-farming movement rested upon the cumulative observation and experience of explorers, traders, travelers, miners, cattlemen, and frontier farmers, who gave the American public an ever-growing appreciation of the potentialities of the region beyond the Missouri."*

—DRY FARMING IN THE NORTHERN GREAT PLAINS, Mary W. M. Hargreaves, Harvard University Press, 1957.

this attitude of inquiry that the American people renewed the task of settling up the remainder of their public domain.

Foremost among the inspectors of the undeveloped region were the Army officers. From the time of the Louisiana Purchase, on through the years of later territorial acquisitions, newly acquired holdings were constantly under the scrutiny of these men. They formed the advance guard, the "picket line of civilization," as their organization was called. Not only did the military stand between the hostile Indians and the oncoming settler, but that branch of the government continuously fed back information to the East about the nature of more remote and unsettled parts. Reports of Army officers comprised a kind of bridge between the earlier stories of absolute sterility and the highly colored and exaggerated descriptions later published by the population-hungry western railroads. Military men were traditionally cautious about "puffing" the new country, but at the same time they saw possibilities in certain sections of it and expressed enthusiasm in their writings.

At the close of the Civil War General William Tecumseh Sherman, known to millions of his countrymen as the "hero of Atlanta," took command of the Military Division of the Missouri. It was an empire in itself, stretching westward from the Mississippi River, beyond the Missouri, and across the Rocky Mountains, and bounded

on the north and south by Canada and Mexico. The acceptance of this assignment was not done in the usual manner of the good soldier taking what was given him. Sherman requested the duty. Second only to General Grant in rank and fame, he had his choice, and unhesitatingly he selected the West as his place of work. Ever since his early days in California, during the Mexican War, Sherman had displayed an interest in America's undeveloped regions and it was here that he wanted to spend his remaining Army life.

The new western commander had never seen most of the country beyond the Missouri, but he had some opinions about it gained from the reports of his subordinates and from the accounts of civilian travelers who had been there. General John Pope, Sherman's predecessor in the West, reported in 1866 that the land lying between the 99th meridian and the Rockies was certainly the Great American Desert. He called it a region of "high, arid plains, without timber," lying beyond the reach of agriculture and he concluded that it must always remain an uninhabited desert. General Randolph B. Marcy, who once again was inspecting those parts, said the mid-continental section was "destined in the future, as in the past, to be the abode of wandering savages." A new book, by Samuel Bowles of the Springfield Massachusetts *Republican*, was just out. It described the editor's recent trip across the plains, a place he called the "Great Central Desert of the Continent, stretching from the far distant north to the Gulf of Mexico, and separating by four hundred miles of almost uninhabitable space the agriculturally rich prairies of the Mississippi Valley, from the minerally rich slopes and valleys of the Rocky Mountains." While he admitted that it was "not a desert, as such is commonly interpreted—not worthless, by any means," he was convinced that its primary use would be for grazing. To Bowles, the arid basin west of Salt Lake City did not promise even that. It was, he said, "a region whose uses are unimaginable, unless to hold the rest of the globe together, or to teach patience to travelers."

General Sherman was anxious to visit the places of which he had read and, using



The underprivileged of Europe, seeking new land and a brave new concept of freedom, frequently read only the favorable propaganda of the boundless bounty of the Great Plains. But many of them, such as the German emigrant to Montana territory known only as "Old Dutch Frank," set out to farm—"desert or not"—in such lonely homesteads as this near the eastern slope of the mighty Rockies.

information gained, he described to General Rawlins, of Grant's staff, the nature of his new command. Quite within the desert tradition he wrote, "In general terms the settlements of Kansas, Dacotah and Iowa have nearly or quite reached the Western limit of land fit for cultivation, parallel 99° of West Longitude. Then begins the Great Plains 600 miles wide, fit only for Nomadic tribes of Indians, Tartars, or Buffaloes, then the Mountain regions useful chiefly for precious metals." He enlarged upon the notion in a letter to the *St. Louis Republican*, published March 25. "What are the uses to which the vast and desert regions of our country between the 100th parallel and the Pacific basin are to be applied?" he asked. "We know they are useless for agriculture such as prevails in the fertile lands of the Mississippi basin, and that, though gold and silver may be found in certain mountain ranges, yet the great mass of the country seems utterly devoid of value in the future unless other articles useful to our people can be produced."

During the summer of 1866 Sherman toured the high plains. A first-hand view of the country along the old California Trail, up the Platte Valley, did not change his opinions. He complained about the long, dusty road and the "everlasting line of telegraph poles." Nor did the section between Fort Sedgwick, in northeastern Colorado, and Fort Laramie please him. Surely noth-

ing but irrigation would ever attract the farmer to such a region, and even then, he thought, the government would have to pay people a bounty to live there.

General James F. Rusling, who made an inspection tour for the Quartermaster General's office that same summer, had a more favorable opinion of the Platte Valley. As he crossed western Nebraska he noted, "Much of this region is marked on the old maps as the 'great American Desert;' but from all we saw and heard I doubt not, as a whole, it will yet become the great stock-raising and dairy region of the Republic . . . ." The broad river bottoms appealed to him as land that would "produce grass in goodly quantities all summer, and we saw no reason why they should not also grow most cereals and vegetables."

By the time Sherman reached the base of the Rockies his notion of the region's future began to change. He was very happy that farmers had taken advantage of the water that coursed down from the mountains in a number of streams, and had, during the previous six years, constructed important irrigation systems. Like the journalist, Albert D. Richardson, who had toured the country a year before and had predicted great things for the entire West by means of irrigation, Sherman was impressed by its possibilities. "Now flour, oats, corn and grain & vegetables of all kinds are produced here and hereabouts, equal in quality with any at home and of prices





Gen. Sherman was frequently amazed by the vitality and optimism of the building West. Even before the coming of the railroads, which he viewed as the military salvation, he noted the audacity of deeds hurled back at such words as those published in the *New York Times* in the 1870's: "Here are one million square miles of barren country, and the question is, What shall we do with it?". This was Main Street, Nebraska City, about this period. Union Pacific photo.

far below what they could be brought out for," he reported to Army headquarters. "The system is only begun for in each of the Creeks I have seen not one 50th of the water has been diverted from its channels and when all is, I would not be surprised if these mountain streams would irrigate and make most fruitful one fourth of all the land from the base of the mountains out for fifty miles." He was still convinced that nothing could be raised without irrigation but with such a water supply available he thought the method superior to that of rainfall. "Almost all of India, Egypt, South of Spain, Mexico, and Chile are cultivated in this way," he wrote to General Rawlins, "and they have been at various epochs of the world history the granaries of the world. In Utah the system of irrigation has in a very few years converted an absolute desert into fruitful fields and gardens. The Plains lying along the foot of the Rocky Mountains present a vast field for the same species of culture and I shall hope that the small beginning that I have seen will be the initiation of a system of agriculture that will prove of inestimable wealth to our people . . ." Sherman had found his first oasis in the Desert.

At Denver, Sherman was joined by General Rusling and together they inspected the southern part of Colorado. Along the Huerfano they came to the ranch of a former Army man named Colonel Craig. Sherman was delighted at Craig's dam, built to divert water "right & left into canals which supply the intricate system of

smaller ditches . . . by which he can irrigate all the bottom land for miles below him. He has this year 2300 acres in a good state of cultivation, mostly in corn which gives him from forty to sixty bushels of corn to the acre. He and his neighbors produce all sorts of vegetables of the best kind, and have demonstrated beyond all question that all the valleys of the Upper Arkansas can be made by irrigation to produce all that is needed by man or beast." The officer concluded that "I do think that the efforts of these people to transform the desert into productive farms is worthy of the encouragement of the General Government and I will treat of the subject again at length."

By the time Sherman made his report of November 5, 1866, after having actually visited the West, his earlier harsh opinion as to the region's value was further modified. That spring he had called the plains fit only for nomadic tribes of Indians, Tartars or buffaloes; now he said they were "a vast prairie, with good grasses, but generally devoid of trees or minerals, are subject to droughts, and are not inviting to settlers." The mountain region he described as not only rich in minerals but possessed of "forests of timber and numerous valleys susceptible of high cultivation." He was convinced that the Rockies "present a most interesting feature in our future development as a nation."

Of New Mexico, he could not say as much. While he had not yet seen it, reports about the place were not favorable. In Jan-



uary 1866 he advised an Army friend that "It is a worthless waste of land, having no connection with the United States, save as they report, by long lines across deserts devoid of life and grass. Its purchase by the United States in the first instance, was a mistake, and now for all time to come it will be a source of expense without contributing one mite to the national wealth or strength . . . ." That same month he told Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs that the only reason the country ever acquired the Southwest was to spend money, and he recommended "if Congress is now tired of the bargain, advise them to sell Texas, New Mexico and Arizona to Maximilian, even if we have to lend the money wherewith to make the purchase." It was, he said, a land that had been settled longer than his native state of Ohio, yet it had progressed but little and was inhabited by a people who were "a poor, miserable set as a whole." To him, it was inconceivable that the better class of white emigrant would ever settle there, except to make a fortune selling supplies to the Army.

In the spring of 1868 Sherman visited the Territory about which he had such a low opinion. During the latter part of May he and Samuel Tappan, a member of an Indian Commission, talked with Navajo tribesmen at Fort Sumner, New Mexico. When it was proposed that the Indians be moved out of the eastern part of the territory to their old homes in its northwestern section, there was objection by the white residents. Their only complaint, said the General, whose temper was quick to rise, was that they could no longer make money selling supplies to the Army and the Indian Bureau if the Indians were moved out. "Take away the troops from this country and it will be poor indeed," he wrote to General Grant. "The only profitable mines in New Mexico have their base in the U. S. Treasury in Washington."

From Fort Union, New Mexico, the General wrote to his brother John, a United States Senator, offering his assessment of the region he was visiting. "This whole country is a desert, with little narrow patches of wheat, corn, beans & cultivated as land was cultivated in Spain five hun-

dred years ago. One county of Ohio will maintain a larger population than all New Mexico. Nor do I see any hope in the future." His concern of maintenance costs was again reflected when he remarked, "This Territory has cost over a hundred millions of dollars already, and will always cost from three to five millions a year, and never by any process can it ever contribute one cent to the national income . . . Even now we are spending annually more than all the country with its houses, land, cattle, sheep and people would sell for, but I suppose it cannot be helped." Perplexed by the questionable future of the Territory, so arid, remote and different from the more settled parts of the nation, Sherman told his brother John he was reminded of the story a friend used to tell about a "Hypochondriac Doctor, who was delivered of the Woodchuck baby. 'Well you are a d----d ugly looking thing, but as you are mine I suppose I must support you.' So of New Mexico. It is a d----d ugly elephant on our hands, but as we were fools enough to buy it of Mexico we must feed and maintain its mongrel population forever."

General Sherman was not alone in his reluctance to abandon the desert theory during the early post-Civil War years. In 1870 an Illinois newspaper warned its readers against taking up homes in the new Greeley colony in Colorado because it was located on "a barren, sandy plain, part and parcel of the Great American desert . . .," and the only crops it was apt to yield would be prickly pears and prairie dogs' holes. Three years later a correspondent for the *New York Times* advised Easterners that the 98th meridian marked a definite boundary in the physical geography of the nation, on one side of which was a land of adequate moisture, and on the other a country "without sufficient rain-fall for the cultivation of the soil." Considering the same area later discussed by Professor Webb, the reporter asked, "Here are one million square miles of barren country, and the question is, What shall we do with it?"

That same year, 1873, J. H. Beadle, western correspondent for the *Cincinnati Commercial*, published his book *The Undeveloped West*. No matter how the traveler went to the Pacific Coast, he said, there



Typical of the "wide places in the road" West was this bustling settlement of "Tia Juana Springs." Although it cannot now be identified, it is believed that this was located somewhere in southern Idaho or Wyoming. Note the barren hills and the dry, eroded soil in foreground.

was no alternative but to cross a desert from five hundred to a thousand miles in width. He judged the region eight hundred miles west of the 100th meridian to be "the 'American Desert': a region of varying mountain, desert and rock; of prevailing drought or complete sterility, broken rarely by fertile valleys; of dead volcanoes and sandy wastes; of excessive chemicals, dust, gravel and other inorganic matter." It was believed that the very elevation of the Great Plains would prevent successful agriculture. "Those who talked so glibly of the reclamation of waste lands of the West," he warned, "must wait until nature flattens out the country, and brings it down into the region of warmer air, and more abundant moisture."

To even a western promoter, deeply interested in the future of the land, there was doubt about agricultural future of the "old desert region." General William Jackson Palmer, President of the new Denver and Rio Grande Railway told stockholders, in his first annual report (1873) that the north-south line was protected from competition by a desolate region to the East of the Rockies. The route of his road, he said, was "separated from the boundary line of arable culture on the eastward in Nebraska, Kansas, and the Indian Territory and Texas, by a width of over 400 miles of arid plains, unfit for settlement except in occasional valleys, and only capable as yet of supporting a population of nomadic stock-raisers"

As the decade of the Seventies drew to a close, Easterners were still highly skeptical about the future of the farmer beyond

the hundredth meridian. An Ohio editor, bound for the Colorado Rockies in 1879, wrote that before one reached the cooler and more verdant regions, "a glaring sunshine ushers you upon the vast plains, the Great American Desert." "The plains!" he exclaimed. "A Dead Sea transfixed in solution by a fierce sun, and baked into sterility." Another writer derided land company agents for outrageously misleading prospective settlers. "These enterprising advocates sometimes indulge in flights of rhetoric that scorn the trammels of grammar and dictionary," he wrote. "Witness the following impassioned utterances concerning the lands of a certain Western railroad: 'They comprise a section of country who [se] possibilities are simply *infinitesimal*, and whose development will be revealed in glorious realization through the horoscope of the near future.' The author decided that the promoters had picked the right word to describe the prospect of the plains; to him infinitesimal meant small or very minute. "What more fitting word could the imagination suggest wherewith

"Up to this time the explorers have failed to find it [the Great American Desert], but in its place have discovered vast grazing-fields, upon which countless heads [sic] of wild buffalo and other game have been subsisting for ages, and which are found just as suitable for the use of domestic cattle. Much of the ground, too, is found adapted to agricultural purposes, and yields, especially in small grains, enormous crops which it requires at first irrigation to produce, but the necessity for irrigation lessens year by year as civilization advances, and man by his labors produces those climatic changes which are known to follow his footsteps."—John Gibbon, "Report . . . October 4, 1878," appended to U. S. Secty. of War, *Report*, 1878.



Famed Independence Rock in Wyoming Territory saw countless Oregon Trail wagon trails move across "The Great American Desert" to the lush, evergreen lands of Washington and Oregon. This picture was taken in 1924, yet it reveals little change in the inherent natural character of the sage-covered land.

to crown the possibilities of alkali wastes and barren sun-scorched plains?" he asked. A railroad enthusiast, describing the contributions of the great Pacific Road, defended the region with a widely-used counter-argument. He admitted that it was "once supposed to be worthless for agriculture," and conceded that much of it could not be irrigated, but, he said, it was "found to be admirably adapted to grazing, and is being rapidly occupied for this purpose . . ." Nor should Americans forget, he pointed out, that nothing had contributed more to the financial or monetary independence of the nation than the West's enormous wealth of precious metals.

\* \* \*

By the Twentieth Century, there was little reference to the Great American Desert, as such. The word was not excised from the language—even the Westerner's—but it was no longer used to designate a large specific area of the nation. What happened to the desert was its gradual diminution and finally, fragmentation. As late as 1917, when George Wharton James wrote his *Reclaiming the Arid West*, he said that America still had "400,000,000 acres of deserts, mostly public domains." By then the desert was largely a point of view: it lay somewhere other than the place where Westerners who talked about it lived. It was like the frontier itself; there was no longer a recognized continuous line of aridity running south from the Dakotas and Montana to Texas. Instead, there were selected deserts, and people who lived on the plains said they were in Nevada, Arizona, or Utah.

During the last quarter of the Nineteenth Century the Great Desert that had appeared so prominently upon maps of the West was talked out of existence, or at least into temporary retirement. To the very early travelers the Trans-Missouri country had looked vast and forbidding. But as men worked their way into it, cautiously, and for a long time slowly, the boundaries of no man's land shrank continuously, until by the Seventies the retreat seemed obvious to a few. Ferdinand Hayden, the government explorer, talked about it during those years, and admitted that the "desert region" yearly was becoming narrower and narrower. He thought that in time it would cease to exist in the imagination.

Even during the Forties and Fifties, when the belief in a desert was at its height, west-bound emigrants frequently were surprised that their crossing of it was accomplished with less difficulty than they had expected. By the end of the Sixties a railroad spanned the West and in a matter of months a once remote place like Denver was served by several railroads. With the coming of the transcontinental lines settlers moved more boldly into the forbidden land and even to its remote and arid sections, invading the very heart of the old desert.

By the end of the Seventies General Sherman admitted that in no fifty-year period in any other region of the earth had there ever been so radical a change as upon the plains during the preceding decade. "Simply prodigious," he wrote. General Phil Sheridan was equally impressed. He reported that "emigrants are so rapidly





Because the railroads, principally, and the government had provided homestead lands in the Great Plains totaling some 210,000,000 acres by 1880, later settlers, still undaunted by echoing of "The Desert Theory" found they had to move all the way to the base of the mighty Rockies to build their pioneer dream homes.

taking up land everywhere in the West, and towns and hamlets are so quickly springing up that almost constant additions have to be made to our military maps to enable us to keep posted regarding the spread of our frontiers." With the great land rush of the Seventies and Eighties the desert was cut to bits, leaving only the most forbidding remnants with the arid title that once described much of the Louisiana Purchase.

The instrument that killed, or at least temporarily anesthetized the desert theory, was the railroad. It was not only Army officers who anticipated the solution of western problems through the use of the new roads; other governmental officials saw their value, too. In 1869, the year the Union Pacific was completed, the Secretary of the Interior admitted that already the nature of the white advance was changed radically because of the new means of transportation. "Instead of a slowly advancing tide of migration, making its gradual inroads upon the circumference of the great interior wilderness, the very center of the desert has been pierced," he wrote. "Every station upon the railway has become a nucleus for a civilized settlement, and a base from which lines of exploration for both mineral and agricultural wealth are pushed in every direction."

The spread of population over the desert did not alone result from the mere appearance of the railroads. To familiarize Americans, and emigrants from all over the world with the West, thousands upon thousands of dollars were poured into one of the largest promotional campaigns the nation had yet witnessed. As early as 1859 a young Harvard graduate, recently put in charge of the land department of the Burlington and Missouri Railroad, saw the point when he remarked, that "he who buildeth a railroad west of the Mississippi must also find a population and build up business." The roads had more than rails and rights of way in the new country. They were, in fact, rivals of the government itself in the matter of land distribution. By 1880 the various companies were granted more than 155 million acres of land, while individual homesteaders claimed but 55 million from the government. These corporations relieved the federal land office of the necessity of advertising western opportunities through their own efforts to attract settlers. Thousands of prospective home-makers first heard about the high plains from one of the millions of leaflets distributed both here and abroad by the railroads. Northern European countries, in particular, were flooded by the literature.

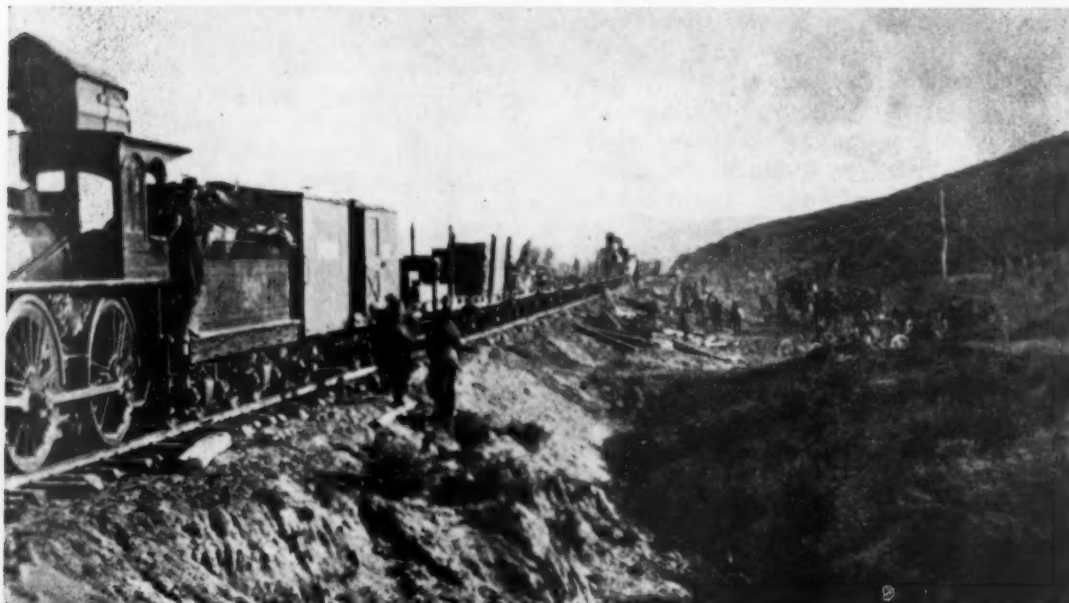
Railroad companies spared nothing in their attempts to attract prospective users. Samples of crops, sworn testimonials, pictorial evidence, all made their way to readers in the eastern United States and Europe. Modern patent medicine and cigarette companies, and their testimonials purportedly supported by reputable doctors, might well have learned such techniques from the flood of "scientific" tracts swearing to the richness of western lands. Jim Hill, of the Great Northern, sought out those "scientists" who agreed with him and then spread the word far and wide that such places as the Dakotas and Montana were a land of milk and honey. The Union Pacific tried to erase the desert theory by converting the West into a climatic paradise with the pen. One of that railroad's writers called the Platte Valley of Nebraska a "flowery meadow of great fertility clothed in nutritious grasses, and watered by numerous streams." Newspapers, chambers of commerce, and all local supporters, readily fell in with the railroads in their praise of the prairie soil and its potentialities. So did steamship companies, anxious to pack their ships' holds as tight as sardine cans with the oppressed of Europe — for a price.

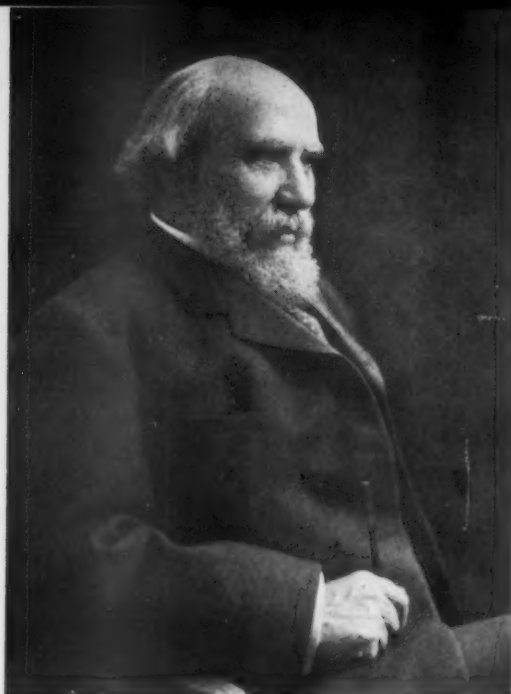
From all over Europe and from the more settled portions of the United States came farmers, each hopeful that here at last was the golden opportunity. Jim Hill's Great Northern offered emigrant fares as low as \$12.50 from St. Paul to points in the sometimes parched reaches of eastern Montana. To further encourage the newcomers car load freight rates on farm machinery, household furniture, domestic animals and other necessities were set as low as a single passenger fare. In other words, a farmer could bring his family and all his worldly belongings west for almost nothing. It is small wonder that thousands regarded it a bargain of a lifetime and tore themselves loose from their roots to partake of the new life where once, in the dim past, there had been talk of a desert. Propaganda pamphlets, testimonials, crop samples, and the irrepressible urge of the American people to go West convinced agrarians that the earlier talk of sterile lands beyond the hundredth meridian fell into the category of groundless rumor.

General Sherman, now nearing retirement, was puzzled at his countrymen. "When I think of the naked plains of Nebraska, Kansas & Dakota, westward to

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As the Civil War and the bloody decade of the 1860's ended, Union Pacific construction crews toiled mightily to bridge the Great Plains and join the humid east and west coasts with a ribbon of steel. Here they work feverishly around the clock to reach the juncture at Promontory Point in Utah. U. P. R.R. photo.





Jim Hill, dynamic northern transcontinental railroad builder, whose Great Northern offered emigrants fares as low as \$12.50 for passage from St. Paul, Minnesota, to dry-land homesteads in eastern Dakota and Montana.

... "Yet despite the publicity given to difficulties besetting pioneer agriculture in the region during the mid-seventies, the development of the past decade had gradually broken down the old conception of a Great American Desert. Outstanding periodicals catered to popular interest in the Montana gold mines by publishing accounts of travelers in the area. These writers duly commented on the "leagues of desert" to be crossed in reaching the mines, on the "desolation" of the "uninhabitable desert" called the *Mauvaises Terres* in eastern Montana; but they also acclaimed the "surprising fertility" of the western valleys, and marveled at the "sweetness and nutriment" of the bunch grass as pasture for animals."—*Dry Farming in the Northern Great Plains* by Mary W. H. Hargreaves.

which go annually a half million of Emigrants, I do not think I was wrong in advising some to go to North Georgia & Alabama, where you have at least water and firewood," he rationalized. "But each emigrant must choose for himself." How could these people, he asked, go out onto the plains "where water is scarce where fuel is dear if not absolutely beyond price — and where the soil is often barren for want of the necessary rain fall. Yet the Alleghany Range with innumerable valleys abounding in rushing streams, boundless forests of timber and good soil remain in a state of nature." It was more than the old gentleman could understand. He had seen the desert. While he was ready to soften his earlier opinion about its uselessness he could not comprehend the magnitude of the rush into its most arid depths.

As Sherman, and others, stood by and observed the persistence of the westward movement in puzzlement, settlers continued their assault upon unclaimed lands. Even nature's most violent threats could not stave off their invasion, once it gained momentum. A pioneer woman, who lived through years of adversity, stubbornly clinging to her western toe-hold, later recalled, "Our attempt to crop and garden was washed out by the flood. The drought followed, and after the drought came the grasshoppers . . ." The Seventies brought

not only drought and locusts, but a national financial panic that meant disaster and a temporary depopulation of the plains. "The country was a desolate ruin for miles and miles," wrote an early resident. "Not a farmer was left, and a few settlers who remained engaged in the stock business, continually singing the song, 'This is not a farming country, it is only good for cattle'." Then the retreat slowed and gradually the tide of western settlement rose again, sending new legions of farmers across the plains.

As the decade of the Eighties commenced the former American Desert region experienced a real settlement boom. Within ten years Nebraska could boast of more than a million residents, while Kansas could top that figure by a half million. The Eighties were also boom years for Dakota Territory. As early as 1881 the land commissioner for the Northern Pacific Railroad reported, "In this region where five years ago there was scarcely a white man, there is now a thrifty population of nearly 35,000 people, hailing from all parts of the world. There were 273,000 acres of land cultivated on the line of the Northern Pacific Railway last year. Barnes County, which is only four years old, has a population of three thousand, with seven hundred farms." By the following year, federal government authorities estimated that in the two year period since the census of 1880 Dakota had grown by at least seventy-five thousand people.





Water was not only the farming and stockranching lifeblood of the region but it soon became evident, after discovery of gold in the northern Rockies, that water was all-important here, too. Mining districts, even in the high mountains, often were productive only for short summer periods because of water shortage.

No one seemed to have read a recent Department of Interior report by Major J. W. Powell, published in 1879 under the title *Lands of the Arid Region*. In it he warned that the hundredth meridian was the westward limit of reasonably safe agricultural endeavor. Such pessimism was howled down by the pamphleteers, who charged the major with a conspiracy against the West. If the settlers gave the controversy any notice, it did not affect the magnetic pull of the frontier upon them. No one could keep them from reading what they wanted to believe and their faith was still in the Golden West.

With each succeeding wave of emigrants the railroads stepped up the propaganda attack. They offered land at attractively low rates and displayed a willingness to extend credit that proved overpoweringly attractive. The Burlington and the Santa Fe lines provided temporary barracks for the newcomers or shunted box cars onto sidings to house the strangers until they could build homes. Such temptations brought forth a new kind of frontiersman, one who normally would never have taken the initial step westward. Those who today talk about the intrepid pioneer and his westering ways, despite Indian dangers and a generally forbidding country, ought to take into account the European farmer who, often knowing little English and less of geography, was plunked down upon a prairie farm by the rising American business man of some 60 or 70 years ago.

The average newcomer was no broadaxe and long-rifle man; he was a transplanted farmer, and he wanted no more than to pursue his profession. It was of such men that the president of the Northern Pacific Railroad complained when they refused to enter Indian country to work on construction gangs. Their forefathers had not moved forward on the cutting edge of American civilization, developing a breed of frontiersmen who expected to cope with daily violence. They had no tradition of suffering at the hands of the natives, and no desire to initiate one. These were people who believed what they had read, weighed the apparent advantages of a new opportunity against the disadvantages of their present condition, and signed up for a trip to the promised land.

As the Nineteenth century closed, the victory of the sod-busters over the desert seemed virtually complete. In a single generation they flooded across the high plains and into mountain recesses, wiping out America's last frontier. Their coming heralded the emergence of modern America, for they brought with them a new way of life. Before the arrival of the farmers the plains' West retained its frontier characteristics, and if the homesteaders had moved into a land similar in humidity and transportation facilities to that farther east, the change might not have been so obvious. But the agricultural pioneers of the plains lived in a new type economy. Theirs was a cash crop, made possible by the railroads, and

*"By the first of July Mirage Flats was settling up, a covered wagon here, a dugout and the square patient faces of oxen there. Strips of nigger-wool sod lay straight and flat as bands of metals or greened into rows of two-speared, heat-curved corn. By now no plough would penetrate the brick-hard soil. Dry-land whirlwinds picked up bits of grass and weeds, tossed them high in the air, dropped them capriciously back upon the prairie, and zig-zagged on. Heat dances and illusionary lakes riffled away the noon hours on the whitish horizon. Already some of the settlers turned their bronzing faces from these signs of aridity and, with a deepening of the sun scowl between their eyes, lifted the lids of their water barrels, wondering how long before the rising yellow sand bars of the Niobrara would choke the little channel a man now could almost jump across."—Mari Sandoz, OLD JULES, Little Brown.*

wherever the rails went, so did the farmers. Well connected with eastern markets, the homesteaders gave up the subsistence agriculture followed by their forebears. Railroads, rural free delivery, and mail order houses permitted them to live like, and look like, Americans in any other part of the land.

The transformation of the great plains by this polyglot army of plowmen appeared to be a triumph for America's favorite individual, the "little man." By the thousands these people swarmed westward, shoving aside the cattlemen, staking out claims and fencing off the land. Like the locusts they had to combat, the homesteaders spread over the countryside, cutting checker-board squares from the public domain, infiltrating even the most unlikely farming regions. Reminiscent of the early goldrush days, they tore up the sod in frantic haste, mining the soil for the golden color of wheat, with absolute disregard of warning signals that predicted failure.

When the sod-buster legion had made its deepest infiltration, and already was chanting a song of triumph, there came the awful realization that perhaps this was no land of easy conquest but instead, a gigantic *cul de sac*, a trap from which there might be no escape. While freight and interest rates soared, the price structure sagged. Bonanza years, followed by desolate, parched years, caused markets to fluctuate wildly. When "the desert" struck back at the invaders with sustained viciousness, using all its climatic weapons, eastern creditors shook

their heads in sadness over the plight of their western brethren, and demanded the money due them. Desperately the farmers looked back over their shoulders, but there was no place to retreat. Nor was there any chance to go farther West; the frontier had closed like a vise.

Slowly a great truth dawned on the prairie folk. Difficulties that once appeared temporary in nature were now revealed to be deep-seated, permanent agricultural ailments. Cornered, the agrarians turned upon the East, the railroads, the government at Washington, the world itself, and snarled like animals at bay. When the first bitterness subsided, they turned to each other and sought a solution to their dilemma. It was at that moment the great plains truly became a region. Common problems, common hatreds and common hopes drove together a people who felt that they were victims of a giant conspiracy, a hoax, and they resolved to strike back.

The railroads, who were the most obvious and nearest objects of farmer resentment, argued that competition and straitened circumstances had forced them to raise their rates. The large number of road bankruptcies gave support to their claim of financial distress, but the frantic farmers, watching their hard-earned investments slip away, were deaf to any explanations. They looked about them and saw the desert re-appearing. A western newspaperman wrote, in 1898, that "Hundreds of abandoned houses dotted the desert, publishing to all who passed the poverty of the country. Where the



A typical sod-buster's haven in Eastern Montana. When the dry-land around failed to produce a crop, the family ate, only because of the small irrigated garden.

buffalo and the Indian had flourished and waxed fat, the white man had starved. One could see from the car window how the home hunter had fretted the earth that had given nothing in return for the costly seed sown, and the lone sod house, silent save for the cry of the west wind that came moaning in through the open window, told its own story. There was a way — there is a way — to make this desert bloom, but the lone settler had not found it out."

Bitterly the lone settler charged the railroad promoter with plotting his doom. Railroad magnates like Jim Hill were now accused of perpetration of fraud, and the reputation clung, long after his death. In 1946 Bruce Nelson, in his *Land of the Dakotahs*, called him the land's worst enemy and changed his title from Empire Builder to Empire Wrecker. "The northern plains and its people," said Nelson, "have suffered more, perhaps, through his misguided efforts than through the work of any other single agency. They are still suffering from them." The specific charge: enticing thousands to an arid land with promises of an agricultural paradise, and of tearing up a sod that ought to have remained for other uses. Joseph Kinsey Howard, Montana's leading defender, wrote that many of his people blamed their condition of ruin on Jim Hill and his flamboyant promises about the delights of homesteading far out beyond the humid regions.

Those who stayed on, during the years when many of their neighbors elected to decamp, charged everyone and everything, except the land itself, with responsibility for their plight. The so-called "Populist Revolt" of the Nineties featured a political attack by agrarian groups who largely asserted that their troubles were man-made. The appearance of better years, and a more favorable price level, went a long way to quiet the dissidents. Then came the wet years of World War I and an abnormally large demand for foodstuffs. The retreat was now reversed, and again the farmers sought out unplowed land to plant, anxious to take advantage of record grain prices. There was little talk of America's wastelands during this episode.

By the end of the 1920's, sagging prices, dry crop years, and international financial unrest brought new difficulties to agricultural plainmen. As a fresh exodus commenced, the old desert received a new title: the dust bowl. Dramatic attempts on the part of the New Deal only partly alleviated the difficulties. But again the western farmers were bailed out by World War and abnormal rainfall. The decade of the 1940's once more saw "the old American desert region" enjoying years of unprecedented prosperity that continued on after the war. By the Fifties there was heard the familiar complaint about dry years in many sections



of the vast Great Plains area, and a mounting concern over the future of water supplies.

During the winter of 1956-57 the fear arose that another dust bowl, reminiscent of the Thirties, was in the making. President Eisenhower demonstrated the concern of his administration when he made a flying trip West to determine, as best he could, the seriousness of the situation. Professor Webb, a long-time student of the region, prepared his article for *Harper's*, in which he called the country of which he wrote an "abnormal land." *Fortune* magazine, in its April issue, featured an article entitled "A Strategy for Drought" in which it stated that for five years farmers of the Southern plains had experienced the severest moisture shortage ever known to white residents.

The *Fortune* article struck a more optimistic note than that of Webb, published a month later. "The current drought dramatizes the progress farmers have made toward mastering the environment of the Plains," wrote the editors. "On this broad belt between the Rockies and the prairies of the Midwest, farmers haven't been able to control their erratic climate, or even to forecast its vagaries, but they do have new tools and techniques for dealing with the climates consequences. With powerful modern tractors farmers can now dig deep into the moist subsoil and bring up stable clods whenever the surface threatens to blow away. New ways of tilling, contour plowing, and terracing get more moisture into the soil and hold it there." More important, the article continued, farmers have recognized the fact that dry years are as normal as wet ones, and they are learning to play percentages, hoarding their resources, money and moisture, to cope with periods of climatic adversity.

Then the rains came. The spring of 1957 set moisture records in many a western community and the residents again talked hopefully of better days. As they watched the earth turn green and reservoir levels rise to new heights they had the feeling that things would be all right after all, and gleefully they twitted the Texas historian for gloomy thoughts about the desert.

At the height of the talk about the relief from water shortages, the *Denver Post* reported that the small town of Frederick, twenty five miles to the north, had, according to its own newspaper, "already passed away into the land of ghost towns from the lack of the life blood of any community — water." For more than a month the little community had been without a water supply. Ironically, it was not the extended draught that caused the trouble, but a flood of May 9 that roared through Frederick, caving in a coal mine shaft that was the town's sole source of water.

Much of the truth that Walter Prescott Webb now speaks—that hurts so many dedicated westerners so much—springs from the promotional propaganda which literally engulfed the world for almost forty years after 1870. Obviously many westerners, who certainly should know better, were brainwashed during the process—and neither they or their offspring are going to accept the objectivity of the first visitors to the Great Plains, who promulgated "that ridiculous Desert Theory."

While there are those who will fiercely defend the West, and angrily deny that it is or ever has been, a part of the Great American Desert, they are forced to admit that it is indeed a land of violent extremes. It is a place where nature's exaggerations are apparent in distances, altitudes, natural wonders, and climatic eccentricities. Ever since the first white men saw the region they and their descendants have tried to comprehend it and to equate their findings against past experience in other climes. A hundred years after Zebulon Pike they are still having difficulty making the mental adjustment.

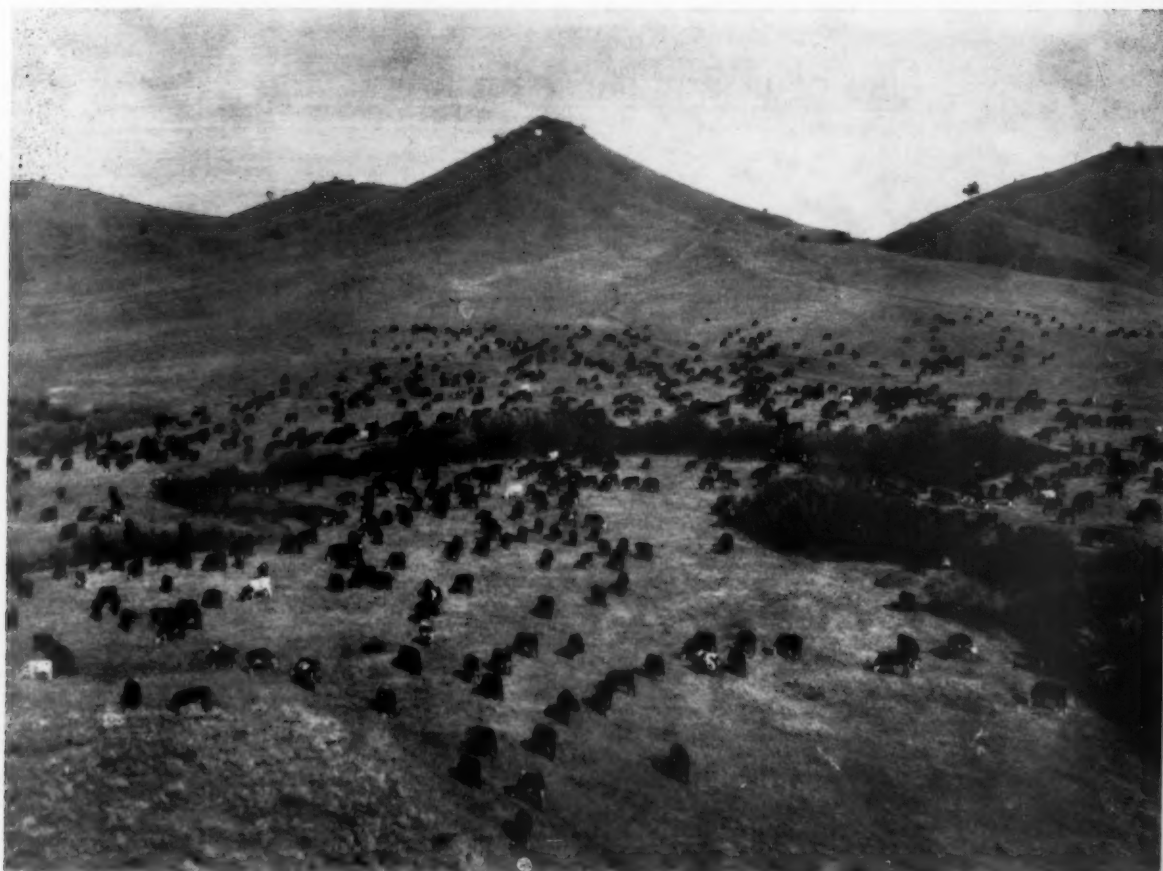
As an old timer in Montana once said, "Damn such a country — where it snows on the Fourth of July and dried apples are a luxury."



*"For we ourselves, and the life that we lead, [1885] will shortly pass away from the plains as completely as the red and white hunters who have vanished before our herds. The broad and boundless prairies have already been bounded and will soon be made narrow. It is scarcely a figure of speech to say that the tide of white settlement during the last few years has risen over the west like a flood; and the cattlemen are but the spray from the crest of the wave, thrown far in advance, but soon to be overtaken."—Theodore Roosevelt, HUNTING TRIPS OF A RANCHMAN, 1885.*

As Dr. Athearn says in the closing words of his historical appraisal of the region, "While there are those who will fiercely defend the West, and angrily deny that it is or ever has been, a part of the Great American Desert, they are forced to admit that it is indeed a land of violent extremes. It is a place where nature's exaggerations are apparent in distances, altitudes, natural wonders, and climatic eccentricities . . ."

Pictured here, from a 1916 photograph taken on the Biering-Cunningham ranch, near the Madison River in south central Montana, is a vast herd of fat range cattle thriving on a sea of natural grass. The first settlers across the Oregon Trail, the 49-ers, and Mountain Men seeking a new livelihood after the end of the fur trade—all noted this strange contradiction—fertile oasis with good water and grass in all parts of the semi-arid West; and the amazing nutritional value of the native grasses, which even when seemingly scarce, according to Eastern standards, not only sustained life but produced fat-larded range animals. After the close of the Civil War, the over-extended ranges of Texas caused the beginning of great trail drives. Ultimately they drove to unbelievably good ranges in Western Nebraska, the Dakotas, eastern Colorado, Wyoming and Montana, such as this, where the range, wisely used, was ever profligate, historically and today.





## PLIANT PRAIRIE

By John T. Schlebecker

### One plant's influence on one prairie state

**I**N MANY ways, the experiences of the men of western South Dakota epitomized that major human achievement—partial conquest of the northern Great Plains' vagaries. Men never found it easy to live on the Great Plains. And as time passed, farmers, particularly, were forced to greater and more varied accommodations if they were to survive. In part, the history of man's agricultural accommodation to semi-arid life on the Plains includes the introduction and use of a foreign plant—sorghum. Many farmers were almost certainly saved by sorghum during the dry, Great Depression years of the 1930's!

Sorghum, African in origin, was among the first plants cultivated by man. It was probably imported into the United States at New Orleans by Negro slaves sometime before 1830. The plant then quickly spread northward and shortly appeared in southern Ohio, Indiana and northern Kentucky. By 1838 it had appeared in Georgia. In 1855 "Dourah Corn" was introduced from the West Indies and "Sorgo Sucre" entered from China by way of France. Around 1877 Minnesota Amber was developed from this Chinese Sorgo. From Minnesota Amber scientists at Highmore, South Dakota in 1903 selected an early strain which they called

Dakota Amber. This variety was further developed at other stations. Scientists at all South Dakota Agricultural Experiment Stations were working on sorghum by 1912, and in 1915 the seeds of Dakota Amber were distributed to farmers. Before 1915 no strain of sorghum had been suited to the short growing season of the state.<sup>1</sup>

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Dr. Schlebecker is well known in Montana educational circles, having taught and lectured at both Montana State University and Montana State College. His specialty is agricultural history and his able work appears in most of the reputable journals. He is at present in the Department of History, Government and Philosophy at Iowa State College, Ames.

MONTANA the magazine of western history



"Meanwhile the main stream of westward movement penetrated southeastern Dakota. With the opening of Indian lands between the Big Sioux and the Missouri rivers in July 1859, settlers began to farm the lower valleys of the Big Sioux, the Vermilion, and the James. For two or three years conditions were favorable and crop yields were ample for home consumption. From 1862 to 1867, however, Indian hostilities followed by several years of drought and grasshopper ravages almost destroyed the nascent development. Military authorities frankly advised settlers to leave the land to the Indians; the Union Pacific Railroad sought to divert emigrants to lands adjacent to its line advancing across Iowa and Nebraska; and agents of Iowa and Minnesota sidetracked Dakota-bound settlers before they reached their destination. Crop failures lent plausibility to a story circulated in Sioux City, Iowa, that the Great American Desert began just west of the James River. The picture was heightened by the reports of discouraged settlers who abandoned the struggle in Dakota and returned to the East. Of sixty families who had reached the Territory under the auspices of the Free Homestead Association of Central New York in 1864, only about half remained. As late as 1869 an effort was made in Congress to repeal the legislation organizing the Territory, when Representative James M. Ashley of Ohio declared that Dakota was worthless for agriculture and must for a century, at least, remain Indian land."—**DRY FARMING IN THE NORTHERN GREAT PLAINS** by Mary W. M. Hargreaves.

The Great Plains region of South Dakota, located west of the Missouri, includes roughly one-half the area of the state. The region has always presented special agricultural problems. Geologically the Plains are in a state of mature erosion. Unlike the eastern part of the state, western South Dakota was not covered by the Wisconsin ice sheet. Consequently the region is gently rolling and rough. But some level areas do occur. These are either former erosion levels or rock outcroppings. The stream valleys are deeply entrenched, bordered by buttes, with generally roughened slopes. When this condition is acute, the area is popularly called Badlands. Rivers in the Badlands have steep banks, and the infrequent but heavy rains have eroded the soil without supporting vegetation. With grades of 8 to 10 feet per mile, drainage in all of western South Dakota is rapid. Very little of the total rainfall remains in the soil.<sup>2</sup>

WINTER, 1958

The soil of the northern Great Plains has been eroded by wind as well as by water. The winds are persistent, generally of high velocity, and gales are frequent. The steady winds cause rapid evaporation and increase plant transpiration. If winds become gales when moisture is scarce, the crops may be destroyed in a few hours. In some years these "hot winds" are more destructive to crops than actual shortage of rain. In the winter the gales become blizzards.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> J. C. Stephens, J. H. Martin and H. N. Vinall, *Identification, History, and Distribution of Common Sorghum Varieties* (U. S. D. A., Technical Bulletin 506, Washington, 1936) 2-3; 12-14, 17, 68; A. N. Hume and C. Franzke, *Sorghums for Forage and Grain in South Dakota* (S. D. Ag. Exp. Sta., Bulletin 285, Brookings, 1934) 8; for a brief and general review of the use of sorghum on the Plains, T. C. Richardson, "An Immigrant that Opened a New Empire," *Southwestern Social Science Quarterly* 31 (Dec., 1950) 186-190.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen S. Visher, *The Geography of South Dakota* (Chicago, 1918) 39-41, 42; Herbert S. Schell, "Adjustment Problems in South Dakota," *Agricultural History*, 14 (April, 1940) 65.

In Western South Dakota the rich black surface soil is removed by erosion almost as soon as it is formed. Consequently the surface soil is usually olive-brown to olive-grey, 8 to 12 inches deep, heavy in texture, granular when moist, sticky when wet, and aptly called "gumbo."<sup>4</sup> Rainfall on the Dakota Plains averages less than 20 inches a year. For example, at Cottonwood, South Dakota, between 1910 and 1933, less than ten inches fell in one of these years, and for eleven years rainfall was less than 15 inches. For fully one-half of the period rainfall was insufficient for ordinary agriculture. From 1890 to 1939 weather stations in western South Dakota recorded an over-all average of 17.81 inches a year. By contrast, the average from 1929 to 1939 was 15.08 inches. When the average amount of rainfall hovers around 15 inches a year, a very small reduction may cause serious damage to crops and livestock. Even people suffer. Because of the rapid runoff and high rate of evaporation, any precipitation below 15 inches is a drought.<sup>5</sup> Western South Dakota, like so much of the Great Plains, clearly presents special challenges to farmers and stockmen.

The growing season is fairly short on the northern Great Plains—generally around 120 days. The average daily temperature variation for most of South Dakota is near 20 degrees, and ranges of 50 degrees are common. The farmer, therefore, had to have plants which matured early, resisted wide temperature variations, but still produced adequate returns. For western South Dakota the ideal plants also had to be able to grow in clay soil, withstand periodic drought, and resist severe gales of hot wind. Because the reproduction and maturation of grasshoppers is almost unlimited, the best plants had to be grasshopper resistant as well.<sup>6</sup>

The story of Great Plain's grasshopper devastation is long and depressing<sup>7</sup>. And in South Dakota the insects have been especially destructive. In 1945, G. B. Spawn of the Experiment Station observed:

During the past 90 years of agricultural history in South Dakota, 41 have been years in which grasshoppers in localized areas were present in numbers sufficient to do considerable damage to crops. During 17 of these 41 years grasshoppers have been a serious pest . . . over a large part of the state.<sup>8</sup>

Most of the area west of the Missouri was closed to white settlement until early in the Twentieth Century. After the area was opened a disproportionate share of damage by grasshoppers took place. At first farmers and scientists believed that cultivation of the land would reduce the danger of the pest. They soon found, however, that cultivation gave the grasshopper more places to breed, and furnished them with a "greater, more varied, and more succulent food supply than did the native grasses." Consequently the insects were more numerous than before the land was touched.<sup>9</sup>

All species of destructive grasshoppers were noted. They added one more problem to the difficulties of farming on the northern Great Plains. The successful plant not only had to overcome the geographical and climatological disadvantages of the region, but also had to resist grasshopper attacks. And, of course, it had to be a profitable crop. Sorghum was such a remarkable plant.

Sorghum is an annual grass which grows from 2 to 15 feet high. The stems consist of a hard cortex filled with pith interspersed with vascular bundles. Leaf blades have a waxy surface. The seeds are borne in a panicle of varying size

<sup>4</sup> W. J. Berry, *Land Utilization in Haakon County, South Dakota* (Chicago, 1940) 36; Visher, *op. cit.*, 51-52.

<sup>5</sup> J. C. Brown and H. G. Byers, *Chemical and Physical Properties of Dry Land Soils* (U. S. D. A., Technical Bulletin 502, Washington, 1935) 5; O. R. Mathews, *Dry Farming in Western South Dakota* (U. S. D. A., Farmer's Bulletin, 1163, Washington, 1920) 5.

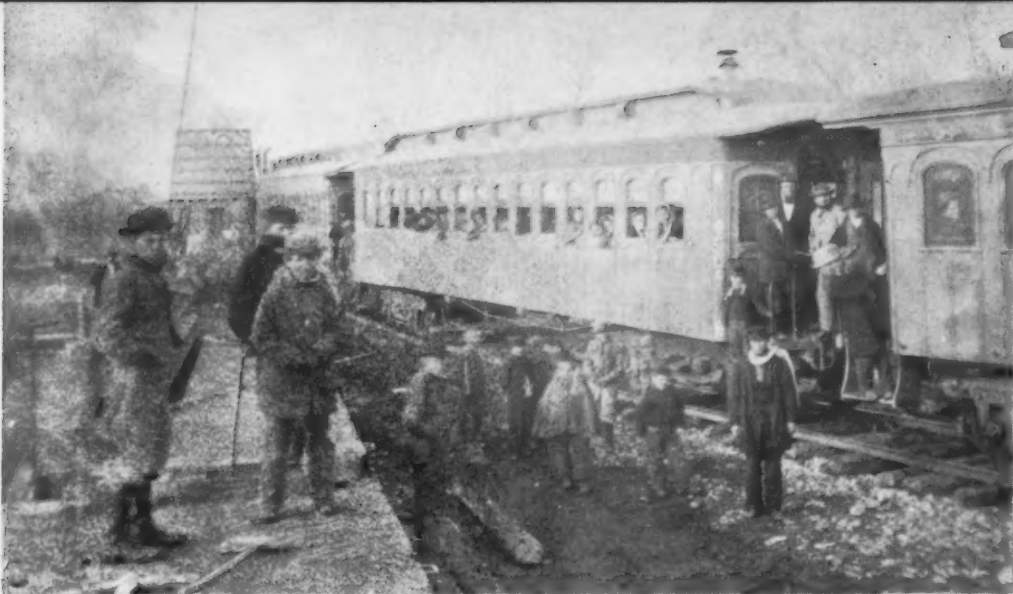
<sup>6</sup> Hume and Franzke, *op. cit.*, 59; United States Department of Agriculture, Weather Bureau, *Climatological Data for the United Sections*, 26, Parts 1, 2 and 3, 1940.

<sup>7</sup> Visher, *op. cit.*, 57 and 169; J. R. Parker, *Grasshoppers and their Control* (U. S. D. A., Farmer's Bulletin 1828, Washington, 1939).

<sup>8</sup> John T. Schlebecker, "Grasshoppers in American Agricultural History," *Agricultural History* 27 (July, 1953) 85-93.

<sup>9</sup> G. B. Spawn, *Tillage Methods in Grasshopper Control* (S. D. Ag. Exp. Sta., Bulletin 379, Brookings, 1945) 3.

<sup>9</sup> Parker, *op. cit.*, 1; Schlebecker, *loc. cit.*, 87-88.



As press agents glorified "the golden harvests to be obtained for the asking from the free, fertile bonanza homesteads of the West," land hungry emigrants crowded every train into the Dakotas. The eager faces of the homeseekers is evident in this old, unidentified photo from the Montana Historical Society files.

consisting of many branches carried on a hairy axis. Sorghum is also a xerophyte. That is, it can grow when water is scarce. Some xerophytes, such as cacti, are fleshy plants which hoard water. The non-fleshy type, like sorghum, can tolerate an extensive amount of drying and still live. When moisture is greatly reduced these xerophytes transpire less than other plants. When water is unavailable sorghum merely stops growing (Under similar conditions "normal" or mesophytic plants usually die.) When water is again available, the sorghum begins to grow once more.

The cells both absorb and lose water very slowly. Thus strangely enough, sorghum is very wasteful of water when growing in moist soil. Because sorghum cannot use large amounts of water, it is of limited value to farmers in humid climates. Generally xerophyte roots do not develop fully because they commonly lack enough water to grow properly. Still, their absorbing systems are extensive and always efficient.

Cattle seemed to find any sorghum more palatable than corn and thus wasted less. Unripe sorghum had a high hydrocyanic acid content. It poisoned most animals, except hogs. Sorghum was, however, safe to use as silage any time. If the crop was used as feed other than si-

lage it had to be matured before harvest. Used as fodder, sorghum was found less digestible than corn, and had less protein, but otherwise compared favorably. As silage it was 50% higher in feeding value than other crops. As a grain crop, sorghum yielded below other plants in most areas outside the Great Plains. Since the stalks dried slowly they generally contained too much moisture to be baled and so could only be marketed locally. Sorghum was by nature limited almost entirely to the stock and forage-crop pattern of agriculture.<sup>10</sup>

On the whole, sorghums are nearly invulnerable to the forces which attack plants. Not only do they withstand prolonged drought, but their diseases are few and easily prevented. Most varieties are but slightly injured by chinch bugs, and sorgo and kafir are nearly immune to grasshopper attack, after the plants have grown above 8 or 10 inches. When none of these dangers were present, sorghum yields were unimpressive compared with other crops, but in bad years the sorghum crop was often the only one harvested. In 1933 scientists at the Agricultural Station, at Vivian, South Dakota, planted identical acreages of corn and sorghum.

<sup>10</sup> R. E. Getty and H. N. Vinall, *Growing and Utilizing Sorghums for Forage* (U. S. D. A., Farmer's Bulletin 1158, Washington, 1920) 21; Martin and Stephens, *op. cit.*, 31-38; Stephens, *et. al.*, *op. cit.*, 44-45.



The corn yielded nothing, but sorghum yielded 1,591 pounds of silage per acre. Grasshoppers and drought caused the failure of the corn crop. In Haakon County, during the dry year of 1934, sorghum accounted for one-half of the harvest although it was planted on only one-tenth of the crop land. These results seemed to impress scientists and farmers.<sup>11</sup>

The type of sorghum best suited was a sorgo strain called Dakota Amber. This plant contained less sugar than other types of sorgo, but as a forage crop it had certain distinct advantages. It matured early, around 87 days, and was of medium height, averaging 5 feet under normal conditions. It could be planted, cultivated and harvested with the same machinery used for corn. This was an important consideration for farmers who had much capital already invested in machinery. Yields were practically the same whether the land was continuously cropped or allowed to lie fallow. Experiments by workers in state and federal Departments of Agriculture indicated that Dakota Amber was the best sorghum for the region west of the Missouri River and north of Nebraska. It was, in addition, a better feed crop than either corn or oats. Except for the extreme northern part of the state, it was generally well suited to western South Dakota.<sup>12</sup>

Before the Great Depression, farmers apparently were not greatly interested in Dakota Amber. In 1919 only 25,745 acres of sorghum were harvested. This figure declined to 10,746 acres in 1924, and then

rose slightly to 15,655 acres in 1929. From 1919 to 1929 sorghum accounted for less than one-tenth of one per cent of all the cropland harvested in the state.<sup>13</sup> One reason sorghum did not attract much attention seems to be that many of the farmers, native as well as immigrant, could not afford to change crops and machinery once they had begun in a particular pattern of agriculture. Sorghum had not been part of their original pattern.

Between 1904 and 1915, millions of acres of Indian lands west of the Missouri were opened for settlement, and the real rush into the northern Great Plains began. Coincidentally, between 1905 and 1909 the rainfall was remarkable. Thus the new settlers thought the land could be farmed as in the regions they had left. Farmers tried the cash crop system. They were further encouraged in this by state and federal Agricultural Departments, whose employees began an intensive search for drought resistant cash crops. This program was unfortunate in one respect: it gave the farmers the idea that a suitable cash crop would be found for this section of the Great Plains, and that any other adjustments would be unnecessary.<sup>14</sup>

During this same period farms tended to be small because the federal land policy restricted land to 160 acres under the Homestead act. The Desert Land act of 1891 was of little use because most of the northern plains, with its rough surface and short water supply, could not be irrigated as the act required. The 320 acres allowed was too small, and so was the 320 acres under the Enlarged Homestead act of 1909. This act of 1909 came after much of the land had been settled and most of the farmers could not use it even if they had been so inclined. The 640 acres allowed for cattle raising under the act of 1916 was still too small, and it also came too late. Thus government policy, except in later years, encouraged the cash

<sup>11</sup> Martin and Stephens, *op. cit.*, 41; Stephens, *et. al.*, *op. cit.*, 30 and 46; Berry, *op. cit.*, 41.

<sup>12</sup> Martin and Stephens, *op. cit.*, 9; Stephens, *et. al.*, *op. cit.*, 67-68; Hume and Franzke, *op. cit.*, 10, 19, 36, 47; John S. Cole, *et al.*, *Work of the United States Dry-Land Field Station, Ardmore, South Dakota, 1912-1925* (U. S. D. A., Technical Bulletin 17, Washington, 1927) 20 and 31. It should be noted that Dakota Amber was not the only sorghum which was successful in the northern Great Plains. Sudan Grass was frequently satisfactory, but it was found to produce less fodder because it required more water per pound of dry matter than did Dakota Amber, and although the growing season for Sudan was short, it was more frequently caught by frost. The region east of the Missouri was where Sudan was most successful. H. N. Vinall, *Sudan Grass* (U. S. D. A., Farmer's Bulletin 1126, Washington, 1920) 7; Hume and Franzke, *op. cit.*, 47; Cole *op. cit.*, 25; the census does not distinguish between varieties of sorghum so the exact relative use cannot be determined, but it is doubtful if Sudan Grass was of any great importance.

<sup>13</sup> Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940 *Agriculture*, I, "Statistics for Counties, 2, (Washington, 1942) 458; Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940, *Agriculture*, III, "General Report," (Washington, 1943) 725.

<sup>14</sup> Schell, *loc. cit.*, 67-69; F. E. Clements, "Climatic Cycles and Human Population in the Great Plains, *Scientific Monthly*, 47 (Sept., 1938) 196.



From the days of the 49's and thereafter, the emigrant wagon trains moving inexorably westward, wherever possible followed the bottom lands and water routes—whether the trickles of minute streams or of sizeable rushing rivers—because water and grass were necessary for both human and animal survival in the westward struggle.

crop system. Actually, stock and forage crops seemed to have suited the area best, but the wet years of 1905-1909, followed by the First World War and high prices, caused the farmers to favor wheat. Dakota Amber appeared in 1915, but farmers were uninterested. So slight was their interest that in 1930 farmers and others found they could not buy seeds for certain varieties of sorghum.<sup>15</sup>

Between 1919 and 1929 neither nature nor the markets forced farmers to change agricultural methods. Nor were the farmers encouraged to follow the old system. On one hand, rains were good for most years between 1920 and 1923, although there was a drought in 1921. But falling prices led swiftly to farmer misery. In 1921, 1,120 mortgages were foreclosed in 54 counties, in 1922 foreclosures rose to 2,202, and by 1923 there were 3,023 forced transfers. The largest volume of foreclosures in western South Dakota occurred between 1922 and 1926. That is, until the Great Depression.<sup>16</sup>

Clearly by 1922 wartime prosperity was no more.

In 1926 farm prices started to decline again, and were destined to become worse. Furthermore, the amount of land taken for tax delinquency increased nearly every

year between 1919 and 1929. In 1919, 1,228 acres were seized, and in 1929, 351,723 acres. The total for the ten year period came to 1,321,881 for all of South Dakota!<sup>17</sup>

Undoubtedly most of these events represent adjustment to the expansion of the war years, but just as certainly they reflect the plight of the farmer between 1919 and 1929. Depression had come. But after all, prices had risen slightly between 1921 and 1925, good rainfall came some few years, and the grasshoppers had not yet appeared in any great numbers. Farmers failed to consider sorghum seriously.<sup>18</sup>

In 1929 the Great Depression began. In that year also the real increase in the use of sorghum in western South Dakota started. In many ways 1929 was a good year. The rainfall was abundant (21.41 inches in all of western South Dakota, 17.91 inches at Cottonwood); prices for

<sup>15</sup> Schell, *loc. cit.*, 69-70; Clements, *loc. cit.*, 196 Hume and Franzke, *op. cit.*, 8, 59.

<sup>16</sup> Norris J. Anderson, *What Price for this Land?* (S. D. Ag. Exp. Sta., Bulletin 368, Brookings, 1943) 9; S. E. Johnson and H. A. Steele, *Some Aspects of the Farm Mortgage Situation in South Dakota and their Relation to a Future Land Use Policy* (S. D. Ag. Exp. Sta., Circular 9, Brookings, 1933) 22-23, 15.

<sup>17</sup> South Dakota State Planning Board, *Agricultural Resources* (Brookings, 1936) 75; Johnson and Steele, *op. cit.*, 23.

<sup>18</sup> Census, *Agriculture*, I (2) 458.



South Pass City, in Sweetwater County, Wyoming, as seen in this interesting early photograph by M. D. Houghton of Rawlins, Wyoming; was quite typical of many of the Dakota settlements of the same period on the prairies to the East. Historical Society of Montana Photo.

farm products rose; the number of foreclosures dropped significantly; and the grasshoppers made only slight inroads. Nevertheless most farms were too small; farmers still relied on the cash crop. The land was being plowed up, thus breaking resistance to wind erosion and increasing breeding places for grasshoppers. Where grazing was done it was over-done. The prairie grasses were being depleted. Most farmers were heavily in debt.

And then the trouble began. First came the fall in prices. In the northern Great Plains the total value of all farm products dropped nearly 65% between 1929 and 1939. Corn which in 1929 sold for \$.73 a bushel only brought \$.28 in 1933, \$.41 in 1938 and \$.38 in 1939. The price of wheat rose only when there was none; the price of beef cattle fluctuated but generally declined.<sup>19</sup>

Next came the drought. The dry period from 1930 to 1939 was the most continuous ever recorded for the United States. For the northern Great Plains the worst years were 1931, 1933, 1934, 1936, 1937, 1939. With the exception of 1932, none of the other years were accounted good, and even in 1932 less than 20 inches were recorded in the area west of the Missouri. Between 1931 and 1937, for example,

Haakon County averaged 10.99 inches a year, and Cottonwood received a mere 7.36 inches in 1931. The effects were seen in the crop failures of certain years. Widespread and severe failures of the wheat crop took place in 1931, 1933, 1934, 1936, and 1937; that is, for five years out of eleven. The crop in other years was not much better. Corn, which resisted drought better than most wheat, failed miserably in 1931, 1934 and 1936, seeming to set these years off as the worst of all. Under these conditions farmers found it nearly impossible to make a living because they had to earn enough in one year to tide over two or three bad years. With low prices this became less possible each year. The only hope was rain, and year after year the rains failed to come. In July, 1936, *Newsweek* began a five page description of the drought in South Dakota with a paragraph which might have been written of other Great Plains droughts, both before and after:

*Cattle staggered and fell, and did not rise. Toward afternoon the bleating of sheep thinned into silence around empty water holes. In cities men and women slumped along asphalt paving ridged like mud . . . Bells tolled imploringly for prayer.*<sup>20</sup>



South Dakota farmers were becoming desperate.

Some indirect results of the drought were soon apparent: in December, 1935 the relief rolls of South Dakota comprised 39% of the total population; more than any other state in the nation. Church membership fell off because people could not afford to support the institution: and farm tenancy made new gains. Although these and other results were serious, the most important result was farmer despondency.<sup>21</sup> People lost their spirit of initiative. This condition appeared clearly in their reaction to the grasshoppers.

In the thirties grasshoppers could be controlled by spreading poison or by deep plowing around the borders of fields. But the typical attitude of the farmer was: "Why bother? Drought will ruin the crop anyhow." Consequently farmers suffered from the eighth plague as never before:

... grasshoppers shadowed the ground as they dropped toward dying fields. When the grain gave out they attacked leafless trees, fence posts, clothing hanging in backyards.<sup>22</sup>

Faced with a shortage of food, jack-rabbits escaped into Nebraska. Between 1929 and 1938 crop loss to grasshoppers amounted to \$52,500,000, placing South Dakota second in the nation (behind North Dakota) for this type of loss. The attack of 1931 was among the worst, but the hoppers came again in 1933, 1934 and 1936 when only the southeastern and extreme western parts of the state escaped serious attack. In 1938 three-fourths of South Dakota lost from 51% to 100% of the crop, while most of the remaining area lost from 31% to 100%. In 1939 a similar attack was centered in the southern Great Plains, although South Dakota also suffered. Between 1937 and 1941, farmers lost to grasshoppers 21% of the value of all crops produced in the state.<sup>23</sup>

One of the most obvious results of the plague was the increased interest in sorghum after 1930. Any farmer could see that in large areas near him sorghum was the only plant which was not eaten off level with the ground. In 1934 scientists of the South Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station even predicted that sorghum

would always replace corn in any area where grasshoppers were a threat. Yet in spite of the evidence of its usefulness, farmers did not greatly increase their acreage in sorghum.<sup>24</sup> The farmers apparently needed more persuasion, and it came to them in the fall of 1933.

In South Dakota, November 11, 1933, the farms first began to blow away.

By mid-morning a gale was blowing, cold and black. By noon it was blacker than night, because one can see through night and this was an opaque black. It was a wall of dirt...

When the wind died and the sun shone forth again, it was on a different world. There were no fields, only sand drifting into mounds and eddies that swirled in what was now but an autumn breeze. There was no longer a sectionline road fifty feet from the front door. It was obliterated. In the farmyard, fences, machinery, and trees were gone, buried. The roofs of sheds stuck out through drifts deeper than a man is tall.<sup>25</sup>

One day later the dust was over Chicago; three days later it was over the Atlantic. Winds soon swept across most of the Great American West, eroding everywhere. Farmers and urbanites were alike stupified.

Terrible wind erosion occurred throughout the Great Plains Region between 1933 and 1939. The erosion was serious in itself, and it also focused people's attention on the farming methods used. If a farmer specialized in a cash crop the fol-

<sup>20</sup> Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940, *Agriculture*, II (1) "Statistics for Counties," (Washington, 1942) 727-733; South Dakota Cooperative Crop and Livestock Reporting Service, *Annual Report*, 1943 (Sioux Falls, 1943) 6-7.

<sup>21</sup> "Merciless Sun and Scourge of Insects," *Newsweek* 8 (July 18, 1936) 7.

<sup>22</sup> Schell, *loc cit.*, 71; W. Kumlien, *Basic Trends in Social Change* (S. D. Ag. Exp. Sta., Bulletin 348, Brookings, 1941) 7.

<sup>23</sup> *Newsweek* (July 18, 1936) 8.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-11; S. D. Planning Board *Agricultural Resources*, *op. cit.*, 22; Kumlien, *Summary of the Relief Situation*, *op. cit.*, 55; E. Eiseln, *A Geographic Traverse Across South Dakota; a Study of the Sub-Humid Border* (Chicago, 1943) 22; "Grasshoppers and Dry Weather," *Science* 89 (June 9, 1939) 8; Spaw, *op. cit.*, 3; Hume and Franzke, *op. cit.*, 8.

<sup>25</sup> Hume and Franzke, *op. cit.*, 44-45.

<sup>26</sup> R. D. Lusk, "Life and Death of 470 Acres, Kernstrum Farm in Beadle County, South Dakota," *Saturday Evening Post* III (Aug. 13, 1938) 5-6 plus.

lowing sequence of events could be expected. First he plowed the land and broke it up so that wind could catch fragments of soil. Then a crop which would normally prevent erosion would be withered by drought or hot winds. Or else it would be completely destroyed by grasshoppers. Or perhaps the field would be too well harvested with no protecting stubble left, and open for erosion. Then the wind would get at the soil.

The cattle ranges were no better. Cattle ate the grass early in the spring when it was beginning to grow. This either killed or stunted it, and resistance to wind erosion was broken. In order to prevent this sequence, farmers and cattlemen had to keep their cattle on fodder until the native grasses had grown stronger. But this in turn required a forage crop which would grow under conditions of water shortage and grasshopper attack.<sup>26</sup>

For farmer or rancher, sorghum was the ideal crop. Its use, however, demanded the end of the small cash-crop farm. Sorghum was profitable only when combined with stock raising. The cattleman had to use sorghum, at least in part, because an overgrazed range was as vulnerable to wind as plowed land. Sorghum was an element in the accommodation to life on the Plains, and farmers used it to survive. But at the same time the size of holdings and patterns of farming were changed.

In the middle thirties the Federal government indirectly encouraged South Dakota ranchers to shift to sorghum. The government attempted to reduce distress in agricultural areas, and prevent soil erosion at the same time. In 1934, President Roosevelt withdrew from sale or settlement all unappropriated public land in Custer, Fall River, Jackson and Pennington Counties. The land withdrawn was put into a federal grazing project.<sup>27</sup> In 1937 some of this land was released for public sale or settlement, but the rest was held for soil erosion control.

The withdrawal of public lands tended to reduce any expansion in grazing which might have taken place in the area. In 1938 the federal government tried to reduce grazing land still further. By an

act of that year ranchers and farmers were paid to reduce grazing land by one-fourth, and to seed grasses, plant trees and dig wells. Under this program the farmer either reduced his herds or else found a forage crop to replace the feed lost by the reduction of his range. The exact effect of the federal program cannot be reliably estimated, but certainly the decrease in grazing land must have caused some shift to sorghum, and was valuable in soil conservation.

At about the same time, when the United States Department of Agriculture undertook control of soil erosion it frequently used sorghum in the program. This helped encourage farmers to introduce the plant. An example of this activity concerned one of the farms which had blown away in 1933. From 1933 to 1936 this farm was useless; the farmer deserted it as a lost cause. In 1936 the government sent in W. P. A. workers to farm it because it was an unfortunate eyesore near a demonstration area of the Soil Conservation Service. The effort of 1936 failed. Then in 1937 the whole farm, right up to the edge of the buildings, was planted to Sudan and Dakota Amber. All other plants had failed, but sorghum grew and "the desert" was reclaimed. Farmers from miles around could come and see.<sup>28</sup> In addition to its field work, the Department of Agriculture also turned out a mass of literature on sorghum. This, too, undoubtedly had influence on farmers of the northern Great Plains.

Because it was only supplementary feed, sorghum was economically practical only when used in conjunction with fairly large farms. Range and sorghum complemented one another. A few federal bureaucrats believed that some of the people on small crop farms should be removed and resettled. The wheat farmer on small acreage either could not or would not change to the livestock and forage crop method of farming. For a time federal officials toyed with the idea of resettling these farmers, but nothing was done, and in

<sup>26</sup> Clements, *loc. cit.*, 203-204.

<sup>27</sup> Executive Order 8361, 1940 *Supplement to the Code of Federal Regulations of the United States of America* (Washington, 1941) 110-112.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*; Executive Order 7671, *Federal Register*, II (1) (Washington, 1938) 1262-1263; Lusk, *loc. cit.*, 30-31.



Water has been, since the first white habitation, the lifeblood of the West. Water Conservation in some form, has been practiced since the beginning of the first settlements in the Great Plains Region—and it is an ever-continuing need. Here, near the rich strike of Last Chance Gulch, Helena, M. T., at the foot of the Continental Divide, it was necessary to build storage dams to conserve the spring run-off for the parched summer months which would follow. Ed M. Reinig photo. Historical Society of Montana.

time, nothing needed to be done. Depression, drought, grasshoppers and dust storms finally forced the small farmers to abandon their land.

Proportionately more farmers left the whole Great Plains than left this state. Between 1930 and 1940 South Dakota lost 7% of its population, and 21% of its farm population. But the Great Plains lost 30% of its farm population! The migration of farmers suggested that the small cash crop farmer was being forced out. Dilapidated farm buildings, fallow fields and deathly quietness gave further evidence of the process.<sup>29</sup>

The migration was accompanied by an increase in the size of the average farm on the Great Plains. In 1930 farms averaged 703.9 acres. This increased to 1,141 acres by 1940. On the other hand, the amount of land devoted to crops decreased 32% between 1929 and 1934, and fell an additional 8% between 1934 and 1939. Simultaneously, livestock value in comparison to the total value of farm products increased considerably for western South Dakota. Two things happened: (1) the money value of farm products de-

creased, and (2) at the same time farmers on the Plains shifted away from a cash crop system toward a livestock and forage-crop pattern. The small farmer left. The ranchers and farmers who remained absorbed some of the abandoned land in order to survive.<sup>30</sup> But they in turn had to raise sorghum, or some other feed crop, because they did not have enough range merely to graze cattle.

Thus as agricultural distress increased, sorghum played a more and more significant part in the general readjustment. Although the amount grown was not great, the rate of expansion was phenomenal when compared with the production before 1929. For example, in the state the acreage of sorghum harvested advanced from 15,655 acres in 1929 to 472,890 acres in 1934 on up to 1,071,895 acres in 1939. The dollar value

<sup>29</sup> Census: 1940, *Population*, II "Characteristics of the Population," (Washington, 1943) 460-463; Fifteenth Census of the U. S.: 1930, *Population* III (2), "Montana-Wyoming" (Washington, 1932) 838-842.

<sup>30</sup> Census: 1940, *Agriculture* I (2) *op. cit.*, 468-473; *ibid.*, II (1) 727-733.

<sup>31</sup> Census: 1940, *Agriculture* III, *op. cit.*, 725; Census: 1940, *Agriculture* I (2) *op. cit.*, 458; even so sorghum accounted for only 5.8% of the total value of all crops in 1939. The importance of sorghum was better reflected in the value and numbers of livestock.





Coupled with plant-searing winds and sandstorms in summer, there was often the winter extreme of terrible blizzards and drifting snow across the Great Plains. The moisture of snow was vital, but it entailed real hazard to both human and animal life. This abnormally heavy snowfall occurred at the cowtown of Dupuyer, Montana, in Mid-October, 1899. Historical Society of Montana photo.

of the crop shows the same general picture. The rate of increase in acreage caused the total value of the crop to advance consistently in spite of severe drops in price over the years.<sup>31</sup>

In the region west of the Missouri, the acreage devoted to sorghum did not increase as much as in the state as a whole. The expansion was impressive nonetheless. The advance would probably have been greater if farmers on the Plains had not been involved in more and different adjustments which diverted some of their energy and slowed change. Some of these, such as the population movement and the trend toward larger farms have been noted, but there was the additional fact that much land simply had to be abandoned as range or crop land. Sorghum supplemented grazing land but did not supplant it. Where no range existed, sorghum culture was pointless.

Furthermore, the very conditions which forced farmers to use sorghum also posed problems for its introduction. For years many farmers had just been getting by. The attacks of nature, added to the depression, gave birth to a sort of quiet, but futile despair. Farm tenancy increased, and the tenant was not an innovating farmer. Farmers, generally, had no great incentive to change. Many were unable to change, even if they wanted to. Some

gave up hope, and others lost interest altogether.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps the important fact is not that the change to sorghum and livestock was slow and incomplete, but rather that there was any change. Still, by 1939 sorghum was definitely established in western South Dakota.

In 1940 the acreage devoted to the plant had increased again and gave every evidence of continuing to expand. But wet years and the Second World War with high prices for foodstuffs halted the advance and even caused farmers to reduce plantings.

These reductions were not too great. Another dry cycle, which according to most people was probably on its way—would boost sorghum into prominence again. The northern Great Plains farmer would not likely be completely unprepared for drought and depression.<sup>33</sup>

By 1939 the nation, including South Dakota, was advancing from the deepest depths of the depression. The part played by sorghum in this recovery is difficult to assess. The total amount grown seems to indicate that its influence could not have been great in the general improvement. But that is not much to the point. For the steady rise in production did mean something. It meant that farmers who could use the crop had gradually

converted to it. For these men, sorghum was often a life saver. Those who used the crop were generally the farmers who had increased their land holdings and taken actively to stock raising. And these were the men who continued the occupation of this section of the Great Plains.

Stock raising was important in the economy of western South Dakota. By 1939 68% of the value of all farm products was represented by livestock. Attacks of

nature, modified by government policy, had forced the farmer to rely more and more on forage crops to supplement the range. Without doubt the best crop was sorghum, and the census shows that sorghum was, indeed, being used. Between 1937 and 1940, the value, and generally the numbers, of cattle increased in South Dakota. The increased value had causes outside the state, but the increased numbers meant that farmers were accommodating to life on the Plains.<sup>34</sup>

At first men did not understand that the Great Plains were different, but they made the discovery over the long, hard years. The Great Depression and nature's vagaries finally forced them to unfamiliar action. The story of sorghum is thus a segment of the history of the Great Plains and its agonizing reappraisals. Many more adjustments must yet be made.

<sup>33</sup> Census: 1940, *Agriculture I* (2) *op. cit.*, 495-501; Census: 1940, *Agriculture III* *op. cit.*, 211; S. D. Planning Board, *op. cit.*, 89-90; C. Hicks, "Devasted and Half-Conquered," *American Mercury* 33 (Dec., 1934) 495-499.

<sup>34</sup> South Dakota Cooperative Crop and Livestock Reporting Service, *Annual Report* (for the years 1940, 1943, 1944, 1945 and 1947, Sioux Falls); C. J. Franzke, *Rancher, A Low Hydrocyanic Acid Forage Sorghum* (S. D. Ag. Exp. Sta. Circular 57, Brookings, 1945).

<sup>35</sup> South Dakota Cooperative Crop and Livestock Reporting Service, *Annual Report*, 1937 (Sioux Falls, 1937) 43 and 99; *ibid.*, (1938) 41 and 22; *ibid.*, (1940) 20 and 28.

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L. A. Huffman, pioneer photographer of Ft. Keogh and Old Milestown, Montana Territory, made some of the greatest documentary photographs of Eastern Montana and the Dakotas in existence. This was typical of the early open-range ranches in the Great Plains region. Credit: Ruth Huffman Scott, Miles City, Montana. Historical Society of Montana files.



# THE GREAT PLAINS, VOICELESS REGION

A dynamic approach to the complex problems of this misunderstood region is sorely needed says

Carl F. Kraenzel

**F**OR THE Great Plains region to be an equal partner in the "good life" with the whole of the United States it will be necessary to have a dynamic program by the people of the region. Included will be resource development, economic opportunity for more population, a growth in the spirit of resident enterprise and risk taking, and an effective adaptation of the institutional structure (total cultural values) to the facts of semi-aridity. To accomplish these ends, many things need to be done, chief among them the encouragement and growth of some dynamic region-centered cities that will serve as forthright spokesmen for the region.

There has been a gradual evolution in the direction of a type of society, in Western Civilization, that has its focal point in the city—a society characterized by urbanism, commercialism and industrialism. Any large area of a nation that does not have such indigenous urban centers will be exploited and impoverished by urban centers outside such an area. And such cities must be disciplined by social rules; otherwise they will exploit and destroy their own hinterland, not to say anything of drying up the hinterland more remote but subservient to them.

A new form of social organization must be devised to bring about a reasonable degree of participation by the hinterland population in those decision-making affairs that occur in the city, and that affect the hinterland population as well as the city population. This new instrument of social organization is true regionalism. The time is at hand for experimenting with such true regionalism in the area of the Great Plains.

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Writings concerning the functional role of the city in our society will not be elaborated on at this point. The literature is voluminous. Some of the more fundamental treatment of the subject has been by N. S. B. Gras,<sup>1</sup> and by R. D. McKenzie.<sup>2</sup> Lewis Mumford,<sup>3</sup> and Don J. Bogue<sup>4</sup> have also written on the subject. The application of the urban role to basin development and to regions has been attempted by this writer.<sup>5</sup> This article is a further attempt to apply the role of urban development to Great Plains conditions.

## *The Plains A Voiceless Region*

Presently the residents of the Great Plains are without a really effective voice in the affairs that affect them. It should be explained that the Great Plains, a unique region characterized by semi-aridity, covers portions of ten states, from the 98th meridian to the foothills of the Rockies.<sup>6</sup> This is 20% of the land area of the Nation, at its widest point some 700 miles and about 1,600 miles in length from North to South.

Three kinds of evidence can be submitted to point up the fact that the people of this region are without effective voice

MONTANA the magazine of western history



in affairs that concern them vitally. First, there is the subjective evidence of personal reaction of the people in the region. Anyone who has diligently worked with the people of the region knows about these attitudes and beliefs, and knows that many people are governed in their actions by these attitudes. For example, a number of years ago the Montana Public Health Association and the Montana Health Planning Committee had meetings in eastern Montana to get program information and plans to local people. As far as the general public, not in attendance, getting information is concerned, the meeting might better have been held in New York City or Chicago. More information would have flowed into the channels of communication and appeared in the local papers than was the case by holding the meeting in the local area. This is not an isolated example. This summer the Great Plains Agricultural Advisory Council met at Sylvan Lake near Custer, South Dakota. The program was cogent with meaning for the region.<sup>7</sup> Mr. Roscoe Fleming, a free lance editorial writer of Denver, is author for the statement that "the important news about the session was not in local or regional papers but was in eastern newspapers." Again, in September of this year the Missouri Basin Interagency Committee met in Helena, Montana. As on other occasions in the past when it has met in the upper basin, the real factual data and the basic issues concerning the program did not come to light. Most of the releases had to do with announcing the meetings, listing those in attendance, and banquet notices. This meeting received special publicity only because of an untimely snowstorm which stranded several of the State governors in Helena, unprepared with adequate clothing.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, there is abroad in the region a general belief that when vested interests of national scope wish to test the

Good God, can it be you made this place,  
This desolate desert land,  
This dreary waste where even the air  
Is filled with the shifting sand?  
And far away as the eye can reach only the sage  
brush grows,  
Gnarled and twisted and hideous,  
While the eternal west wind blows.  
Oh God, what a place! Yet off to the north  
Stand the mountains clouded with snow.  
Majestic and awful and towering  
Guarding the desert below.  
Margaret Delaney, "The Desert Land."

nature and intensity of public awareness "the thing to do is to try it out on the residents of the Plains." Sometimes this reaches into legislative halls as attempted legislation. Evidence for this is cited in the form of repeated attempts to get states to pass discriminatory tax legislation against farmer and rancher cooperatives; or to saddle "right-to-work" laws on an unsuspecting public in predominantly agricultural states; and to petition for rate hikes in public utility enterprises. All these evidences are considered by many in the region as proof that the residents are used like pawns and are without adequate voice in affairs that affect them vitally.

But the ineffectiveness of Plains residents in affairs that affect them can be demonstrated in a more nearly statistical manner. Business enterprises, semi-public agencies and federal government agencies administer many programs and services on an area basis. Presumably such an area approach is intended to get closer to

<sup>7</sup> Don J. Bogue, *The Structure of the Metropolitan Community, A Study of Dominance and Subordination*, (1950).

<sup>8</sup> Carl F. Kraenzel, *The Social Consequences of River Basin Development, Law and Contemporary Problems*, Spring 1957. In fact the entire Spring issue as well as the Summer issue for 1957 of this journal bears on some aspect of this problem. Also see Carl F. Kraenzel, *The Great Plains in Transition*, (1955), Chapters 25, 26, and 27.

<sup>9</sup> This includes the western 2/3's of North Dakota, South Dakota, and Nebraska, the western half of Kansas and Oklahoma, the western two-thirds of Texas, large areas of eastern New Mexico, Colorado and Wyoming, and the eastern half of Montana.

<sup>10</sup> See Proceedings of the Great Plains Agricultural Council, July 25-27, 1957.

<sup>11</sup> The Great Falls Tribune carried a total of 71½ column inches on the meetings for Sept. 15, 17, 18 and 19, 1957, and no editorial comment. In contrast, on the following Sunday (Sept. 22), half as much space (35½ inches) was devoted to the title "Oklahoma turns on Pittsburgh for 41st straight victory."

<sup>1</sup> N.S.B. Gras, *An Introduction to Economic History* (1922).

<sup>2</sup> R. D. McKenzie, *The Metropolitan Community*, (1933).

<sup>3</sup> Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities*, (1938). Also see R. E. Dickinson, *City Regions and Regionalism*, (1947).

the needs of the people, especially the needs that are common to an area. For the Plains, since it has much that is common among the states, such area activity, being centered on cities outside the Plains, has a tearing apart rather than a uniting effect. This can be illustrated best by examples from federal agency operation because the data is more readily available than it is for quasi-public or private agency and business services.<sup>9</sup> For example, the ten Plains states are served by three area offices for services emanating out of the U. S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare. Region VI, out of Kansas City, serves Kansas, Nebraska, North Dakota and South Dakota and other non-Plains states. Region VII, out of Dallas, serves New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas, plus other states. Region VIII, out of Denver, serves Colorado, Montana and Wyoming and other states. No wonder there is not an indigenous and effective public health program for the Plains region, and no wonder that the Old Age and Survivors Insurance Program is not adequately adapted for the farmer and rancher needs in the Plains! The people of the region "fall between the chairs" of the several area offices, so to speak.

Again, an example can be cited in the vital area of farm credit and land bank policy where adaptation to the fluctuating income, induced by the fact of semi-aridity of the Plains, is very essential, and realistic practices need to be devised. In this case the Farm Credit Administration program is administered out of five district offices tearing the region apart rather than making for the necessary unity that will help solve common problems. Montana is serviced out of the Spokane office, and is pulled to the Pacific Northwest. North Dakota is serviced out of St. Paul and identified with agricultural situations in Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin. The Omaha office services Nebraska, South Dakota and Wyoming, along with Iowa. The Wichita office services Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico and Oklahoma. And Texas has a district office

of its own, serviced out of Houston. This five-way division of agricultural interests in the Plains contributes to a splintering effect that offers little hope for participation by the residents in the solution of their credit needs.

The building of adequate roads for the Plains is a basic necessity. The radical fluctuation in temperature would appear to demand adapted construction qualities and practices. Furthermore much of the highway and railroad traffic was stalled in the Plains in March of 1956 not because of heavy snow, but because of the drifting into cuts. This comes about because of the engineering habit of building water-level routes rather than constructing on the contour basis and at upper levels. Many irrigated valleys in the region are having precious agricultural land destroyed by water-level routes, when there is a plenty of space on the higher levels where contour routes could be developed. And a proposal for such changes would require new thinking in the road building science even on the training level—fitting road engineering to the facts of the Plains. But how can this be accomplished when the Bureau of Public Roads is administered in the Plains from four different directions, thus annihilating any possibility of facing indigenous road building problems. One regional office of the Bureau of Public Roads services North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska and Kansas, along with Minnesota and Iowa and Missouri out of Kansas City. Texas and Oklahoma, along with Arkansas and Louisiana, are serviced out of the Fort Worth district office. Montana is serviced out of Portland, along with Oregon, Idaho and Washington. And district number 9, centered on Denver, services Colorado, New Mexico and Wyoming, along with Utah.

These isolated examples merely typify the dissection and segmentation of the Plains effected by the many private and public agencies that are intended to service the region of the Plains. Under such conditions the residents of the region, already a minority, cannot be expected to attack and solve their problems.

The third proof of the voiceless character of the region can be illustrated by

<sup>9</sup> The information for this section is taken from the U. S. *Government Organization Manual, 1957-58*, prepared by the Federal Registry Division, National Archives and Records Services, pp. 320, 357, 287.

**TABLE I**  
1950 Population Totals and for Urbanized Areas by States for the  
Great Plains States and for the Mississippi Valley Area of the Nation\*

State	1950 Population	Area in sq. Mile	Density	Population in Urbanized Areas	Proportion of Total	Number of Urbanized Centres
Montana .....	591,024	145,878	4.1	0	....	0
Wyoming .....	290,529	97,506	3.0	0	....	0
Colorado .....	1,325,089	103,922	12.8	571,990	43.2	2
New Mexico .....	681,187	121,511	5.6	0	....	0
Texas .....	7,711,194	263,513	29.3	2,815,499	36.5	12
Oklahoma .....	2,233,351	69,031	32.4	481,402	21.5	2
Kansas .....	1,905,299	82,108	23.2	283,151	14.8	2
Nebraska .....	1,325,510	76,663	17.3	409,800	30.9	2
North Dakota .....	619,636	77,057	8.8	0	....	0
South Dakota .....	652,740	76,536	8.5	0	....	0
Ten Plains States .....	17,335,559	1,113,725	15.6	4,561,842	26.3	20
Per square mile population for urbanized areas for the Plains States						4.0
Minnesota .....	2,982,483	80,009	37.3	1,091,612	36.6	3
Iowa .....	2,621,073	56,045	46.8	542,182	20.6	5
Missouri .....	3,954,653	69,226	57.1	2,256,247	57.1	4
Arkansas .....	1,909,511	52,675	36.3	209,689	10.9	2
Louisiana .....	2,683,516	45,162	59.4	948,930	35.4	3
Mississippi .....	2,178,914	47,248	46.1	100,261	4.6	1
Tennessee .....	3,291,718	41,797	78.8	980,851	29.7	4
Kentucky .....	2,944,806	39,864	73.9	472,736	16.1	1
Indiana .....	3,934,224	36,205	108.7	1,026,455	26.8	5
Illinois .....	8,712,176	55,935	155.8	5,473,951	62.8	7
Wisconsin .....	3,434,575	54,705	62.8	1,052,660	30.1	4
11 Mississippi Valley States .....	38,647,649	578,871	66.8	14,155,574	36.6	39
Per square mile population for urbanized areas for the Mississippi Valley States						24.0
U. S. ....	150,697,361	2,974,726	50.7	69,249,148	45.9	157
Per square mile population for urbanized areas for the Nation						23.0

\*Taken from the U. S. Census of Population

the relative cityless nature of the Great Plains. A study of Table I shows the following: Out of a total of 157 urbanized areas in 1950, listed by the U. S. Census,<sup>10</sup> twenty are located in the ten Great Plains states, practically all of them outside the Plains proper, in the humid part of the eastern tier of Plains states, or in the mountains of the western tier of states.

And twelve of these 20 centers are in Texas, leaving 8 for the remaining 9 states. Five states (Montana, Wyoming, New Mexico, North Dakota and South Dakota) have no such urbanized centers or population. Of the more than 17 million people in these ten states (1950 count), 4½ million (or 26.3%) live in the 20 urbanized centers. Since the area of



the 10 states covers 1 million square miles (about 37% of the total area of the Nation) the urbanized area population amounts to 4 persons per square mile.

For 11 Mississippi Valley states, this last figure is 24 urbanized area persons per square mile, demonstrating the lack of metropolitanism in the Plains. These 11 states are only half as large in area as the 10 Plains states, but have more than 14 million people living in urbanized areas, and constitute 36.6% of the total population of the 11 states. And there are 39 urbanized areas in the 11 Mississippi Valley states.

For the Nation as a whole, the urbanized area population constitutes 45.9% of the total population, and this metropolitan population is the equivalent of 23 persons per square mile of land area.

#### *The Effect of the Absence of Cities*

It is clear from this evidence that the Great Plains is a voiceless area, largely, because of the absence of cities as the focal point through which the voice of the people can be expressed. Since ours is a society dominated by urbanization, commercialization, and industrialization, the lack of urbanization in the Plains cannot but lead to further exploitation and "feeding" to urban centers outside the region. Population, in recent decades, has moved from the open country and small towns to cities. The absence of important cities in the Plains proper and the Plains states generally, means such population will move out of the states and the region. With them they take the cost of education, health and services expended on them; and take an additional toll in the form of inheritance wealth that flows to areas and cities outside the region. Coupled with disadvantageous economic conditions for the region, and with other forms of economic exploitation, the loss of human and economic wealth attached to such out-migration can be overcome only by federal aid to education, to hospital and medical care facilities, to agriculture generally and to social security services for the Plains states. A denial of these facts for federal aid will result in impoverishment of the region for its educational plant, its facilities for the mentally ill and

retarded, its prisons and reformatory institutions, and for most of its other services, including the standard of living also. A stand on the states rights platform cannot alter this fact of impoverishment. Of course, a substitute, for a time, is to take the cost out of the "hides of the people." This is what Montana is facing in the breakdown of its present prison and reformatory institution services—underdevelopment and poor services that come from impoverishment because of the continual "shipping out" of wealth and resources to population and cities outside the state. Other Plains states are faced with a like dilemma.

There are those optimists in the Plains (and in Montana) who point to growing small towns and cities. And, in fact, there is such growth for the moment. But this may be a mirage—farmers and ranchers who farm and ranch from town and rural oldsters who retire there, with only a sprinkling of newcomers. Between 1950 and 1954, the ten Great Plains states lost 96,980 farms and ranches, or 10.1% of the number present in 1950. The Great Plains proper lost 29,374 farms and ranches, or 8.5%. The mountain area of the 4 western tier of Plains states lost 8.6% of its farms and ranches in that period; while the humid portion of the 6 eastern tier of Plains states lost 11.2% of its farms. Montana lost a total of 2,128 farms and ranches between 1950 and 1954, a loss of 6.6%. But Montana had only a total of 32,957 farms and ranches in 1954. There is not much more to lose, or to give surplus population to towns and cities without "scraping the bottom" of the barrel.<sup>11</sup>

#### *The Need for Cities in the Plains*

It is clear, then, that Montana and the Great Plains proper, as well as the 10 Plains states in their entirety, are faced with the task of building some cities that function dynamically for the states and the region concerned. That such cities can grow and thrive in or closely adjacent to the Plains is demonstrated by Texas which now has 12 of the 20 urbanized areas in the ten Plains states; and by the Canadian Plains which has several larger cities in a like semi-arid region—

Regina, Calgary and Edmonton among them. The arid and semi-arid lands in other parts of the world demonstrate that cities can thrive under such conditions.

A concerted attempt on the part of business and industry can bring economic opportunities to certain strategic locations in the Plains and can help build cities there—not large ones but effective ones. That there is an escape from large cities is demonstrated by the migration into “suburbia” and “exurbia” so characteristic of the Nation’s densely populated areas today. With such relocation of business and industry will come financing, newspaper development, radio and TV decentralization, white collar and clerical employment, wholesaling and retailing opportunities and professional services of all kinds. Analysis of census data shows that centers with population growth in past decades are not those having industry but those with white collar and clerical labor force expansion, wholesale and professional services growth, and personal services extension. When all this is coupled with the relocation of governmental agency services in the Plains proper, a reasonable urban-industrial-commercial-economic complex can be achieved for several smaller cities in the Plains, so that such cities can become the spokesmen for the region.

#### *New Functions for Plains Cities*

Thus far reference has been made to the traditional functions in the economy and the society. There is another important task in the Great Plains. That is to develop an adapted way of living for the region, to test these adapted ways, and

to disseminate them among the people. Briefly summarized the situation is thusly.<sup>12</sup> The Great Plains is a peculiar and distinctive land—a semi-arid land with certain but erratic and unpredictable fluctuations in precipitation, and therefore income to the people. On the other hand, the imported civilization is rooted in conditions of humidity, therefore regularity and predictability of income. America’s entire value system is built on this fact of regularity and predictability of income and is projected onto the Plains through historical accident and through the existing cities outside the region and the fact of voicelessness for the Plains. A study of the evidence demonstrates that the importation of humid area ideas is characteristic even today, perhaps with greater intensity than ever before.

The problem is not that the Plains is semi-arid; and the sole solution is not in extensive irrigation and in artificial rain-making. Rather, the chief solution is to be found in adapting the way of living and the institutional structure (the culture if you will) to the facts of semi-aridity. This does not mean necessarily drastic differences from the values and the institutional structures in the humid area. It probably means minor and strategic differences at critical points; but being strategic and at critical points, these differences are fundamental and basic to survival. These keys to survival have mainly to do with reserves, with mobility and with flexibility. To be specific an example should be cited. Because of fluctuating and unpredictable income in agriculture, the Plains has become known as a high risk credit area. Therefore credit is available at a premium and in stingy quantities, and at the wrong time. But this need not be so. It is only so because bank notes and repayment programs have a specific due date which may come in a period of no income. Why should there be such specific due dates in the Great Plains? But the Spokane branch of the Farm Credit Administration has developed a solution for this, known as the Future Repayments program. In addition to the regular payment on principal and interest, there is a second payment into a re-

<sup>10</sup> Data taken from the 1950 *Census of Population*, Vol. II, Characteristics of the Population, Part I, U. S. Summary, Table 17. By urbanized area is meant cities of 50,000 or more population, plus the adjacent rural fringe area, having more than 150 persons per square mile. Such an urbanized area may include two cities if they are immediately adjacent to each other, as for example Minneapolis and St. Paul. Thus the 157 urbanized areas actually involve 172 central cities. Of these, 168 were defined as metropolitan cities.

<sup>11</sup> Montana, the third largest state, had only 32,957 farms and ranches in 1954 compared with 863,694 for all the ten Plains states, 61,801 for North Dakota, 100,695 for Nebraska, 120,293 for Kansas and 293,234 for Texas. Wyoming had the least of any Plains state, namely only 11,377.

<sup>12</sup> For a detailing of this point of view see Carl F. Kraenzel, *The Great Plains in Transition* (1955). For a more general treatment of this, see Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains*, (1932).

serve fund. The reserve fund payment will be drawn on in case of no income. The task is to have the reserve fund large enough to cover the maximum years of no income. This is a very strategic but only minor change in the procedures of the humid area oriented credit system that pervades the Nation. But the Future Repayments Program has no enthusiastic supporters in banking circles, nor among ranchers and farmers. Perhaps they don't know of this solution and its basic functions. Perhaps they are prejudiced by humid area values. But the idea is a sound one for the Plains and needs to be extended to financing of all business—not only to agriculture, but to main street and to industry, not only for private business but for state and local government, for schools and churches, and for services of all types. But who will sell it to the people of the region and to the banking system outside the region?

This example is but one of many that illustrate the need for adaptation of social organization and institutional structure to the facts of semi-aridity in the Plains. Lack of space does not allow further elaboration. But it is clear that there is a need for basic and fundamental research in the region; for testing and demonstration; and for dissemination of proven facts. Then there is the need for inculcating the proven ways into the fabric of the cultural values for the Plains region. This would mean adding to the existing Ten Commandments, and equally reinforcing the new ones with the necessary sanctions to make them operative. One such new commandment might read as follows: Thou shalt provide reserves for thy living and thy business operations, and for thy local government and schools, and these shall be tax free deductions so that thou might live in independence and free from want; and not to have such reserves shall be a greater sin than the sins of stealing and adultery and murder.

Strategic to all this is the development of several cities in the Plains proper to the place where they are focal points for leadership, encouragement and tolerance in these things—dynamic spokesmen for the region so that people can meet there,

think, invent, and express themselves, and talk back to modify the humid area propaganda that is piped in from the cities outside the region. This will be no easy task and will require much man power.

To accomplish all this it is necessary to have regionalism for the Great Plains—not provincialism, not sectionalism, but regionalism, in the sense of constructive cooperation among its separate parts, and cooperation between the region of the Great Plains and other regions as well as the Nation at large. The difference is subtle and significant. And the implications are far reaching. It will require the fullest trust and cooperation between 10 states (or portions thereof) in governmental matters. It assumes some added governmental machinery so that the individual citizens can participate democratically in the decision-making activity that is involved.<sup>13</sup> It will require cooperation between farmers and ranchers on the one hand, and main street and business and industry on the other hand. It will demand legislation on the state level as well as on the federal level. The task has the proportions of a new frontier that can overcome bigotry and stinginess.

#### *Practical Steps in Regional Growth*

But regionalism of the type indicated will not come full bloom, and cities will not grow in a vacuum. Preliminary to the coming of these two, some practical steps are necessary and are within reach of people today. Neither will be elaborated in detail at this point. These two steps are:

- (1) The creation of a truly region-wide Great Plains Foundation. Such a foundation would promote the necessary study and fact finding, would test adapted techniques, and would assist in the dissemination of the results. It would make sub-contracts with any University or state college of the region in any area of interest. It would work with industry, newspapers, radio and television agencies, with cities and planning agencies and with state and federal governmental agencies. The details have been set forth by this writer elsewhere.<sup>14</sup>





Even in the main range of the timbered Rocky Mountains the dry conditions of a semi-arid summer are of vital concern. This was the summer of 1929, and the U. S. Forest Service pack train was carrying needed supplies along the Lochsa River, important west-slope route once followed by the Lewis and Clark expedition. The pack animals were on their way to the Bald Mountain Fire, destroying stands of virgin timber.

- (2) The creation of a Great Plains Administration as proposed by Senator John A. Carroll of Colorado, and as specified in his recently introduced Senate Bill 2908 (85th Congress, First Session, August 30, 1957). The bill, discussed hereafter in this publication, would create an administration for the Great Plains, governed by a presidentially appointed board of five, with headquarters in the region. The object would be to study and to promote constructive programs, including a coordination of present federal agency services so that they might better focus on the basic problems and their solution for the region.

This writer believes that both of these agencies are necessary—one a governmental one, and one a semi-public or semi-private one. It is clear that the task requires doing, and is an all encompassing one. The need for coordination of all

private and public resources, and state and federal efforts is also clear. There cannot be divisiveness in this task as to whether states rights or federal rights are involved, or whether private or public effort is desirable. All, united, are necessary for the task of salvaging the Great Plains from its prospective impoverishment. And the need for several strategically located cities within the region is also clear. There is a real need for some dynamic cities for the Great Plains today.

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<sup>1</sup>For detail on such regional government see Carl F. Kraenzel, *The Great Plains in Transition*, *Ibid*, chap. 26.

<sup>2</sup>See Carl F. Kraenzel, "A Great Plains Institute: Method and Aims," reproduced in *Cultural Leadership in the Great Plains: The Great Plains Conference on Higher Education*, Univ. of Oklahoma, Oct. 18-20, 1956.

## PENDING FEDERAL LEGISLATION TO CREATE A GREAT PLAINS ADMINISTRATION

On August 30, 1957, Senator John Carroll of Colorado introduced a bill, referred to the Committee on Public Works, "to establish a Great Plains Administration; to provide for the control of floods and the alleviation and control of drought conditions in the Great Plains region; to provide for the more effective conservation, development, and use of the resources of the Great Plains; to provide for the administration of Federal programs in such region so as to meet more effectively the distinctive needs and problems of the region; and for other purposes as stated in the preamble."

As drawn, the bill enumerates 399 specific counties—the number of which appear in parentheses—in the following ten states: Colorado (24); Kansas (58); Montana (39); Wyoming (11); Oklahoma (19); Nebraska (63); South Dakota (49); North Dakota (51); New Mexico (15) and Texas (70).

A condensation of the bill, using direct quotes, where possible, follows: "The Great Plains region has distinctive characteristics in respect of climate, topography, and resource use which are substantially different from those prevailing in adjacent regions, and which are particularly marked by alternating extremes of floods and drought; these characteristics are of fundamental importance in shaping living and employment conditions within the region and in fixing the pattern of its economy and its culture; these special characteristics require special plans and programs to meet the distinctive needs and problems of the region; these plans and programs must be developed and carried out on a comprehensive basis to meet the needs of the region and its people as a whole.

"Heretofore there have been no adequate means for developing and administering the special plans and programs which are required to meet the distinctive needs of the region; and the lack of such plans and programs has resulted in a failure to use the resources of the region

most advantageously . . . [This] particularly has contributed to excessive damage from recurring flood and drought conditions . . . which has . . . cost the region and the Nation far more than would adequate and comprehensive measures to prevent and control such damage.

"The development and carrying out of comprehensive plans and programs designed especially to enable the region to meet the special needs and problems arising from its distinctive characteristics in respect of climate, topography, resources, and economic and living conditions will increase the prosperity of the region, will promote the general welfare of its inhabitants, will conserve its resources, will foster trade and commerce among the States within the region and between these States and other States as well as foreign countries, will increase the revenues of and strengthen State and local governments within the region, and will contribute to the economic strength, well-being, and defense of the Nation. The first and most urgent phase of plans and programs for the region should be directed especially toward the alleviation of and relief from conditions resulting from the devastating floods and the extreme drought . . .

"It is the purpose and policy of this Act to provide . . . comprehensive plans and programs designed especially to meet the distinctive needs and problems of the Great Plains region; to provide for the administration of Federal programs in such region so as to meet more effectively its distinctive needs and problems; to provide for the more effective conservation, development, and use of the resources of the region; to assist in improving economic conditions within the region and in promoting the general welfare of its inhabitants . . .

"It is the policy of this Act to attain these objectives (1) in a manner which will encourage people within the region to engage in agriculture and other pursuits in a manner properly adapted to the

MONTANA the magazine of western history

distinctive conditions of the region, and (2) in a manner which will foster suitable development and support for urban communities and trading centers within the region and adequate to meet its needs. It is the policy of this Act that its objectives shall be carried out with the fullest possible participation by the people of the region and by their State and local governments.

"The Congress finds that the purposes and policies of this Act can best be accomplished by establishing a regional agency of the Federal Government, to be located in the region, which will devote its full time and attention to plans and programs for meeting the distinctive needs and problems of the Great Plains . . . known as the "Great Plains Administration," which shall be an instrumentality of the United States.

"The Great Plains Administration shall maintain its principal office at a convenient place in the region. It shall be held to be an inhabitant and resident, within the meaning of the laws of the United States relating to the venue of civil suits, of any judicial district, in whole or in part, within the region in which the Administration carried on activities at the time of the commencement of suit . . .

"Management shall be vested in a board of five full-time Directors appointed by the President by and with the advice and consent of the Senate. The Chairman of the Board shall be designated by the President. Each of the Directors shall be a bona fide resident of the region at the time of appointment, and each Director shall maintain his residence in the region. No two Directors shall be appointed from the same State to serve on the Board at the same time. Not more than three Directors shall be members of the same political party. The Board is responsible for policy, directive, and general supervisory functions, and shall appoint a chief executive officer, responsible to the Board who shall perform such functions as the Board may determine . . .

"Vacancies in the Board, so long as there be two Directors in office, shall not impair the powers of the Board to act,

and two Directors shall constitute a quorum for the transaction of the business of the Board. Each Director shall be a citizen of the United and shall receive a salary of \$20,000 a year. All members of the Board shall be persons who profess a belief in the feasibility and wisdom of this Act. No Director shall, during his continuance in office, be engaged in any other business . . .

"The Great Plains Administration shall seek the advice, assistance, and participation of the people of the region and their State and local governments and organizations, public and private, to the fullest practicable extent, in the formulation and execution of [its] programs . . . [with] . . . consultation and interchange of views with appropriate representatives of State and local governments, of the educational, agricultural, labor, and business interests, and of the general public of the region; as well as consultation and interchange of views with respect to all phases of its activities and at all appropriate places throughout the region. It shall establish such advisory boards and councils as may be necessary to achieve these objectives . . .

"The Great Plains Administration shall furnish to interested individuals, groups, organizations, and enterprises within the region any technical information, research, or other forms of assistance, information, or advice which are obtainable from the various departments, agencies, and instrumentalities of the Federal Government and which would be useful in carrying out the purposes and policies of this Act. It is authorized to provide technical assistance to State and local governments, and other groups and organizations, within the region to assist in accomplishing its purposes and policies, including studies evaluating the needs of, and developing potentialities for, the economic and cultural growth of the localities within the region. Such assistance may be provided through members of its staff or through the employment of private individuals, partnerships, firms, corporations, or suitable institutions, under contracts entered into for such purpose.



"Working in cooperation with local, State, and regional groups, both public and private, the Great Plains Administration shall develop plans and programs for carrying out the purposes and policies of this Act . . . [These] shall be made available to State and local governments and to private persons and groups insofar as they relate to functions which might be performed by them, respectively, to assist in carrying out such policies and purposes, and shall be submitted to the President and the Congress, and made available to the appropriate departments and agencies of the Federal Government, insofar as they relate to the nature, extent, and timing of Federal programs, projects, and activities in the region.

"Such plans and programs shall, among other things, provide for:

(1) the control of floods and the conservation and use of the waters of the region; (2) fostering the use of the lands of the region for the purposes for which they may be best suited, and the most efficient conservation and management to assure the protection of watersheds and the permanent and increasing usefulness of cultivated lands, grazing lands, and forests; (3) fostering the protection, development, and improvements of cultivated, grazing, and forest lands by flood control, irrigation, drainage, clearing, reforestation, reseeding, or otherwise; (4) preventing of irreparable waste of natural resources from droughts, winds, floods, dust-storms, and soil erosion; (5) fostering a permanently prosperous and well balanced agriculture within the region; (6) the conservation, management, and rehabilitation of birds, fish, and other wildlife through the development, protection, and management of such wildlife and their habitat, and the control of losses from disease or other causes; (7) with special regards for depletable resources and for the great fluctuations that are characteristic of the region, fostering the use of the mineral, forest, land, water, fish, and other resources of the region, and fostering other projects and activities and the development of industries, to assure a balanced and

stable economic development, and to preserve and enhance social and cultural values; (8) fostering the study of the region's problems by its citizens and the dissemination of the results of such study; (9) the establishment and maintenance of recreational areas and facilities, including wilderness areas, and the protection of scenic and scientific values.

"Such plans and programs shall, among other things, set forth:

(1) The nature, extent, general location, sequence, and timing of major projects and activities recommended.

(2) The method by which such major projects and activities are proposed to be undertaken, including the arrangements recommended or agreed to for joint and cooperative action by the Administration, other Federal agencies, and State, local, and other agencies.

(3) With respect to each major proposed Federal project or activity, information as to the economic aspects and effects of such project or activity, including, where appropriate, estimates of costs and benefits, of the allocation of costs to the various purposes to be served, and of amounts to be repaid by the beneficiaries.

"The Administration shall, in cooperation with other Federal agencies . . . prepare and submit annually to the President in connection with its budget program, and to the Congress in its annual report, a statement and explanation of the anticipated program, for the next succeeding fiscal year and such ensuing periods as the Administration may determine, for the initiation and prosecution by the Administration and other Federal agencies of all major Federal projects and activities having to do with the conservation, development, and use of the natural resources of the region, or otherwise affecting the purposes of this Act.

"The Administration shall give first priority to the development of plans and programs for relief from, and alleviation of, flood damage and drought conditions recently sustained or now prevailing in the region and for the prevention and control of damage from floods and drought in the future . . .

"Subject to the policies, conditions, and limitations stated in this Act, and within the limits of funds appropriated therefor, the Administration is authorized to construct, operate, and maintain projects (including standby facilities), and to carry out activities: (1) for the control and prevention of floods; (2) for the conservation and reclamation of lands and land resources; (3) for the development and conservation of forest, mineral, and fish and wildlife resources; (4) for the generation, transmission, and disposition of electric energy; (5) for the promotion of navigation; (6) for otherwise carrying out the purposes and policies of this Act; and (7) for the execution of such other responsibilities as are vested in the Administration by or pursuant to this Act; and, in connection with any of the foregoing, for the development and conservation of recreational resources and for the promotion of sanitation and pollution control.

"To the extent found necessary or appropriate in carrying out the foregoing subsection, or other provisions of law, but subject to the conditions and limitations herein stated, the Administration is authorized and shall have the power—

(1) To acquire real and personal property, including any interest therein by purchase, lease, condemnation, exchange, transfer, donation, or otherwise, and to sell, lease, exchange, or otherwise dispose thereof, including donations incident to experimentation, demonstrations, or other similar uses, and to obtain services by contract, donation, or otherwise.

(2) To make payments with respect to the conservation or use of land or other resources.

(3) To provide such crop insurance and to make loans for such agricultural, industrial, and commercial purposes, and upon such terms and conditions, as the Administration may determine to be appropriate for carrying out the purposes and policies of this Act.

(4) To hold such hearings and take such testimony as it may deem advisable.

(5) To conduct economic, scientific, and technologic investigations and studies,

to establish, maintain, and operate research facilities, and to undertake experiments and practical demonstrations.

(6) To make grants to colleges, universities, or other organizations or persons for conducting research.

(7) To disseminate information to help achieve the purposes and policies of this Act.

(8) Subject to provisions of law specifically applicable to Government corporations to determine the necessity for and the character and amount of its expenditures and the manner in which they shall be incurred, allowed, and paid.

(9) To enter into such contracts and agreements, and to take such actions, as may facilitate the exercise of the powers now or hereafter conferred upon it by law.

"The Great Plains Administration may construct or operate any of its projects or conduct any of its activities through or in cooperation with other departments and agencies of the United States; and it may do so through or in cooperation with States, counties, municipalities, cooperatives, individuals, educational and scientific institutions or other bodies or agencies, public or private. The Administration is authorized to use its funds in carrying out such joint and cooperative arrangements. Departments and agencies of the United States will be authorized to participate in the construction or operation of such projects or the conduct of such activities on terms mutually agreeable to the department or agency involved and the Great Plains Administration.

"The Great Plains Administration shall carry out its construction work by contract so far as practicable: *Provided*, That nothing herein shall be construed to prevent it from undertaking construction work directly in case of emergency or unusual circumstances, in cases where no reasonable bids are received from contractors, or where necessary to provide steady employment for maintenance crews . . .

"Nothing in this Act shall be construed as affecting or intended to affect or in any way to interfere with any vested right

acquired under the laws of any State or Territory relating to the control, appropriation, use, or distribution of water used in irrigation or for other purposes; and nothing herein shall in any way affect any right of any State or of the Federal Government or of any landowner, appropriator, or user of water in, to, or from any interstate stream, or the waters thereof. *Provided*, That nothing in this section shall be construed to limit the authority of the Great Plains Administration to acquire real or personal property, or any interest therein . . .

"Finances of the State governments and subdivisions thereof shall not be impaired through the removal of taxable property from their tax rolls or through the creation of special requirements for State and local government services. In administering this section the Great Plains Administration shall be guided by the general objective of avoiding, insofar as feasible, inequities between State and local taxpayers on the one hand, and Federal taxpayers on the other, in the distribution of governmental costs and burdens. The Administration, upon application made on behalf of any State or subdivision thereof, shall make payments in lieu of State and local property taxes ad valorem with respect to its real property and its tangible personal property with fixed situs . . .

"The Great Plains Administration may make payments to State or local governments to help defray the expense of any special requirements for State and local government services arising from its activities. In determining the necessity for and amount of any such payment, it shall take into account (1) the amount of additional expense incurred by the State or local government in meeting these special requirements, (2) any payments in lieu of taxes made pursuant to paragraph (b) hereof, (3) the provision by the Administration, as an incident to its activities, of any services usually provided by State or local governments, and (4) any other relevant facts.

"The Great Plains Administration shall, not later than five years after the enactment of this Act, submit to the Congress

a report, including (1) a statement of the amount and distribution of payments made hereunder; (2) an appraisal of the effect of the operation of the provisions of this section on State and local finances, the benefits of the program of the Administration to the States receiving payments hereunder, and the effect of such benefits in increasing taxable values within such States; and (3) such other data, information, and recommendations as may be pertinent to future legislation.

"The [Great Plains] Administration shall . . . employ . . . such officers, employees, attorneys, agents, and consultants as are necessary for the transaction of its business, define their duties . . . and provide a system of organization to fix responsibility and promote efficiency. It shall be the general policy of the Administration to employ residents of the region rather than nonresidents . . . No regular officer or employee of the Administration shall receive a salary in excess of that received by the Directors . . .

"In the employment, selection, classification, and promotion of officers and employees of the Great Plains Administration, no political test or qualification shall be permitted or given consideration, but all such employments and promotions shall be given and made on the basis of merit and efficiency . . .

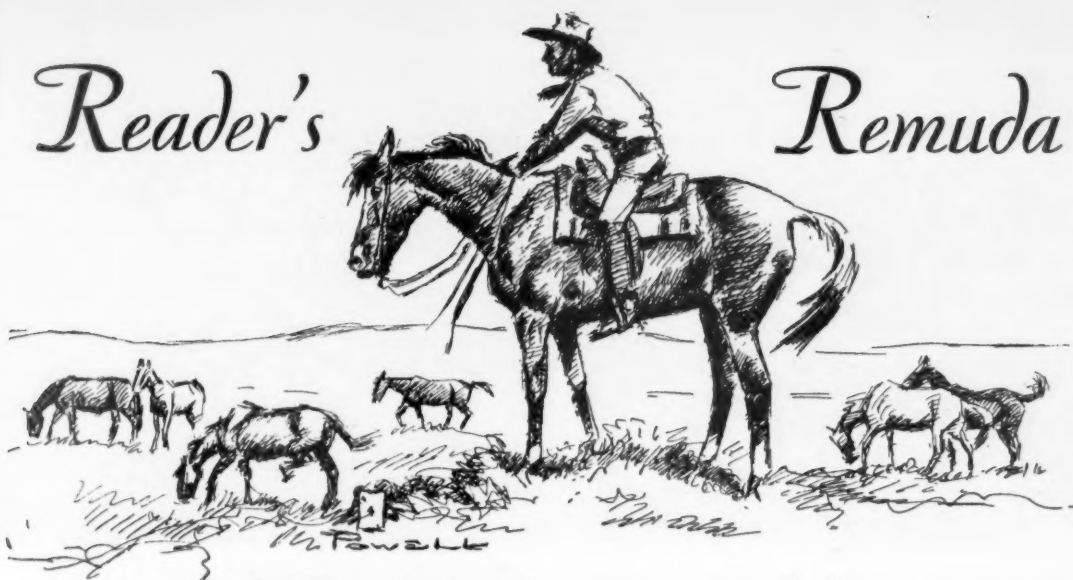
"The Great Plains Administration is authorized to request the assistance and advice of any officer, agent, or employee of any executive department, independent office, or agency of the United States to enable the Administration the better to carry out its powers successfully. The executive departments and independent offices and agencies of the United States are authorized to make such officers, agents, and employees available to the Administration with or without reimbursement upon terms mutually agreeable to such department, independent office, or agency and the Administration. To carry out the purposes of the Act . . . a sum not to exceed \$7,500,000 for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1958, and such additional sums as may be necessary for subsequent fiscal years [are authorized to be appropriated]."

MONTANA the magazine of western history



# Reader's

# Remuda



## *A Roundup of the new western books*

*Edited by Robert G. Athearn*

THE CHARLES M. RUSSELL BOOK by  
Harold McCracken, Doubleday & Co.,  
N. Y., 1957, 236 pp., \$23.50, \$28 and \$50  
editions.

*Reviewed by Muriel Sibell Wolle,  
University of Colorado*

Harold McCracken's book about Charles Marion Russell is a big book, but it contains illustrations of big country, interpreted by a great man whose reputation reaches far beyond the vast Montana prairies and mountains that he knew so intimately. The book is nicely balanced between pictures and text. We expect the pictures and we learn to know the artist through the text.

In Russell, enthusiasm for life on the open range and the pressing urge to record it were so intermingled that it is impossible to separate the cowboy from the artist. As the author says in his opening sentence: "Charles Marion Russell was a cowboy. He was as rough and wild as any of the old-time Montana buckaroos with whom he lived and traveled from the time he was sixteen years old. No one knew cowboy life more intimately, or was better qualified to record the dramatic era of frontier history in which he played a part. Yet no one ever pursued a more contradictory or unorthodox course."

As a boy in St. Louis, Russell was primarily concerned with the frontier life of its waterfront and the types of men and animals moving through its busy streets. School was simply an irritation and something to be avoided. Finally, to cure him of his infatuation for the West, his father sent him to Montana to work on a sheep ranch. "Kid Russell" as he was called, (he was only 16) soon quit *that* job and spent the next two years with Jake Hoover, a trapper, from whom he learned much western lore. By 1882 he was nightherding for cattle outfits in the Judith Basin and, for eleven years he worked summers on the range and holed up winters with other cowpunchers in frontier towns.

According to one of his cronies: "He was no roughrider at all . . . (but) one of the swellest guys I ever knew. (He could) tell stories and make little sketches of the funny things that happened. We'd hurry in at night, just to listen to his yarns and laugh at the pictures he drew . . . There wasn't a cattle outfit . . . that wouldn't hire him. He helped to keep us happy."

Russell never had art training. Most of his pictures were brilliantly documentary. His six-months stay in the lodges of the Blood Indians in Canada gave him quantities of material for future paintings as well as a liking for the red men who



were so much a part of the western country. His retentive memory permitted him to successfully sketch details and likenesses long after he had seen the originals. "A Quiet Day in Utica," drawn entirely from memory, includes portraits of many of the town's well-known figures. His constant observation and study of horses and men in action enabled him not only to depict any given incident with veracity but to communicate to the observer the drama, excitement or tension of the moment.

Although he carried a paintbox and modeling wax with him from the time he arrived in Montana and was constantly making little watercolor studies of incidents seen during the day or modeling figures or animals from soft wax, it was years before he thought of himself as an artist, and sought recognition for his work. These watercolors and drawings of local scenes he gave away to his many friends. Only when flat broke did he sell them for whatever they would bring.

In 1888, he sent his first work to eastern publishers. Recognition from them came slowly for he was unknown and, Frederic Remington and others were already supplying their magazines with western illustrative material. Although his reputation as an artist was acknowledged in Montana, he could not make a living by his art and therefore continued to punch cows and regale his friends with stories dealing with the frontier life that he knew so well.

His marriage in 1896 put an end to his cowboy freedom and caused him to turn seriously to painting. His wife, Nancy, soon became his agent and under her astute and determined methods, his paintings began to receive the recognition and the sales prices that they deserved. A prospective customer once asked Russell how much he charged for his paintings. "I don't know," he replied. "I paint 'em. My wife sells 'em."

Under her urging, the Russells made several trips to New York and later to Europe and California, taking with them paintings to sell. The later trips resulted in many sales and commissions for future work. By 1919, one of his paintings brought \$10,000. Russell was now at the peak of his career and for the first time in his life was without financial worry. Unfortunately he did not live long to enjoy his hard-won success. He died in 1926. Yet during his busy, creative years he produced some 2,600 paintings, drawings and sculptures.

Perhaps the best tribute paid to Russell came from his friend Will Rogers who wrote: "He wasn't just 'Another Artist.' He wasn't 'just another' anything . . . He not only left us great living pictures of what our West was, but he left us an example of how to live in friendship with all mankind."

McCracken in this book gives us a careful delineation of Russell—both the man and the artist. Besides this, he offers a

most comprehensive picture of the vast, wild country to which Charlie chose to belong. Life and conditions in the Judith Basin at the time of the big cattle industry and toward the end of the Indian Wars are described with graphic clarity. The book is filled with more than 200 well-selected illustrations, both pen and ink vignettes and full-page color reproductions of paintings. It is a welcome, lavish addition to the growing collection of most notable Western Americana.



WOVOKA, THE INDIAN MESSIAH, by Paul Bailey. Great West and Indian Series X, Westernlore Press, Los Angeles, 1957. \$5.50.

Reviewed by Dorothy M. Johnson  
University of Montana

When a people despairs, sometimes a Messiah arises to promise a better life in this world or the next. The American Indians have had more than one Messiah, but the one whose influence traveled farthest and fastest and with the most catastrophic results for his disciples was Wovoka. To him, in Nevada, flocked representatives from the desperate tribes of the Plains, to learn the sacred Ghost Dance and to spread his teachings: do right, don't fight, do no harm to anyone.

Wovoka made a splendid promise: a flood would wipe out all the white men, but the Indians, if they danced the sacred dance, would all be saved and reunited with their dead. Wovoka promised heaven on earth—and heaven, to the starving, cheated Indians, was exactly what the white men had taken from them.

The Indians danced—and the great Sitting Bull was murdered. A few days later, 300 frightened Sioux were massacred by soldiers in the "battle" of Wounded Knee.

Who was this Messiah who preached peace and brought slaughter? James Mooney, whose *Ghost Dance Religion* is the classic source book, met and talked with him in 1892. Thereafter Wovoka sank into obscurity as far as white men were concerned. When he died, 40 years

later, he was so far forgotten that his grave marker does not even bear his Indian name.

Paul Bailey has dug out some important facts about the Messiah of the Ghost Dance. Mr. Bailey talked with Wovoka's granddaughter, with the white man who was interpreter on the occasion when Mooney interviewed him, and with other people who knew him. Perhaps because most of these informants were non-Indians, Mr. Bailey makes Wovoka out to be a charlatan, who produced miracles by planned trickery.

Maybe Wovoka was, but he must have believed in himself. He must have convinced himself that he had twice died and visited heaven, or he could not have convinced tens of thousands of other Indians.

On one Montana reservation where conditions are especially pitiful, the Indians are waiting and praying for another Messiah right now. The Ghost Dance is dead, with the people who danced it, but Wovoka may not have been the last Messiah.

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LAW WEST OF FORT SMITH: A HISTORY OF FRONTIER JUSTICE IN THE INDIAN TERRITORY, 1834-1896. By Glenn Shirley. Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1957. 333 pp. Photographs and Appendixes. \$5.

Reviewed by Clifford P. Westermeier  
University of Arkansas

During the last seven years, two books, a reprint, and several magazine articles have appeared on this subject, and at a first glance one wonders why another book. Probably Judge Isaac C. Parker, his marshals, and their victims are as well-known characters of the frontier justice theme as any in the annals of the West. Nevertheless, the author fashions a better story in the re-use of sources found in court records, articles in periodicals, and newspapers of Fort Smith and the surrounding Indian country. In a style somewhat similar to the fiction of an earlier Western school and not unlike the pulps of today, the author, for color, drama, and shock, relies much upon the printed accounts of bloodthirsty and enthusiastic chroniclers and journalists which are verified by footnotes.





It is the story of "hell on the border" with the "hanging judge" who "hanged them high," although the subtitle is misleading in its earlier date. Isaac Parker, the patriarchal-looking, and acting, judge at Fort Smith, Arkansas, 1875-1896, hanged criminals—white, black, red, and those of varying degrees of mixed blood. Seventy-nine went to their doom—sometimes as single culprits and at other times as many as five in a row. Some were residents, and others transients, but regardless of color, number, or position the judge dealt a breath-taking blow to brigandage.

The greater portion of the book deals with justice as it was wielded by Parker in the United States District Court of this border city. However, an interesting and appropriate digression is the author's account of Belle Starr, "The Lady Desperado," "Queen of the Bandits," and "The Petticoat Terror of the Plains," as she was branded by Eastern journalists at the height of her evil career. Given to traveling with "rustlers, highwaymen, Indian half-breeds and cowboys," and to "fornication and merriment," the notorious female was probably ambushed by her last husband, who, although no paragon of virtue, grew tired of "sharing her."

Author Shirley, Captain of the Police Department at Stillwater, Oklahoma, is a graduate of the Institute of Applied Sciences' School of Criminology at Chicago and of the Chicago School of Law and is considered an authority in criminal identification. He consistently wastes no words of sympathy on the lawless. His outlaws are no knights in shining armor; his "dashing lady desperado" is no golden-hearted whore. He approaches his subject as a police officer and manhunter with the skills of a trained historian. Only an index would add to the merits of this book.

**STIRRUP HIGH.** By Walt Coburn. Julian Messner, Inc., N. Y. 1957, 190 pp. \$2.95.

*Reviewed by A. B. Guthrie, Jr.*

To old-timers in Montana (and those approaching that status) the name of Coburn has been long familiar. Robert Coburn, patriarch of the tribe, ranched on a big scale in the Little Rockies country in earlier days. His ranch was the Circle C of old report. There worked three sons, Will, Bob and Wallace, who left their impress, too. Of the three probably Wallace remains the best known, for he authored a slim volume of verse, *RHYMES FROM A ROUNDUP CAMP*, with illustrations by Charlie Russell, that is hard to come by these days.

But along came young Walt, his half-brother, who did still more to perpetuate the name. When Walt wasn't compelled to attend school in Great Falls, he fled to the ranch, there to learn how to handle cattle, break broncs and to draw range wisdom from old hands like Horace Brewster, whose name some will remember, too. Having mastered ranch techniques, he turned his hand to western fiction, for reasons that I do not know. Neither do I know how many stories he has written. Perhaps he doesn't either, for they'd take long to count. I do know this about them: Standard though they may be, they reveal a man who writes, apart from plot, from actual experience on the back of a horse or the end of a lariat.

Now Walt has undertaken something different, different at any rate from what I've seen of his. In *STIRRUP HIGH* he writes factually for younger readers, factually of his kid's life on the ranch, of races, squeaks with Indians, bronco-busting, of the fascinating work and play and hazard of that time and place.

He knows how to tell a story. He writes straightforwardly, without affectation or pretense, with a knowledge of his subject that stirs old memories if, like me, you grew up in a cow town. So his book, entertaining though I am sure it will be to young readers, will have a share of older ones. It will remind them of how things were and things were done in days grown dim. How long has it been, as a small

example, since I recalled the shirts of black sateen that cowpokes and their young idolators used to affect?

It is not a diminishment of this volume to express the hope that it presages another and really adult book. Coburn, who knows as much of early ranch life probably as any man alive, has in head still other things we'd like to know. How was it with Kid Curry's Wild Bunch that he knew and liked? What of the fascinating and incredible characters that inhabited that early range? We want to know it all, and Coburn is the man to tell a great deal of it.

When and if that later book comes out, the hurrahs will sound still louder.



**THREE YEARS AMONG THE COMANCHES: THE NARRATIVE OF NELSON LEE, THE TEXAS RANGER.** Introduction by Walter Prescott Webb. University of Oklahoma Press, 1957. xvi, 179 pp., illustration. \$2.00.

Reviewed by Joe B. Frantz,  
University of Texas

Nearly one hundred years ago Nelson Lee "arrived in the United States, after having spent three and one-half years as a captive of the Comanches. Within sixty days after his return, he and an anonymous editor had completed a manuscript of life among the Indians which has become a treasure to lovers of western lore. Now the University of Oklahoma Press, with an assist from Walter Prescott Webb, has rescued the book from the high-priced collectors' shelves and has re-issued it as the latest in its fine *Western Frontier Library* series. As with the others of the series, this book is a bargain.

Lee would have been worth recording if he had never seen the inside of an Indian camp. An upstate New York youth, he had been bound to wander, so that by the time he hit Texas in his early thirties he was already a veteran of Indian wars and travels as far as South

America. It was only natural that once in the brand-new Republic to the Southwest, he should become a Texas Ranger, serving with such doughty frontiersmen as Ewen Cameron, Jack Hays, and Ben McCulloch. He went along on that most disastrous of all Texas excursions into Mexico—the notorious Mier Expedition with its Black Bean executions; but he fled before the surrender and swam back to Texas. Professor Webb, the acknowledged authority on the Rangers, says that "there is no better description of the life of the Texas Rangers than that given by Nelson Lee."

Lee wrote the book for a common (but not always admitted) reason—money. He also left behind a number of white captives when he escaped from the Comanches, and he hoped that his story might lead to their rescue. It is doubtful that he achieved either of his objectives, but he left behind a tale well worth reading. It is not always gospel, and at times downright vague on places and names, but it gives fully of the essence of two chief Western themes—life among the Rangers and life among the Comanches.

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**THE BEST OF THE AMERICAN COWBOY**, edited by Ramon F. Adams. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1957, 289 pp. \$4.95.

Reviewed by Gene M. Gressley  
University of Wyoming

J. Frank Dobie is reported to have remarked, "Good Lord! Another book about the cowboy! What on earth for!" This reader must admit that on more than one occasion he has shared Mr. Dobie's skepticism. Subsequently, a volume such as *The Best of the American Cowboy* appears and dashes his doubts—temporarily.

In choosing the selections for his anthology of cowboy literature, Mr. Adams has employed three criteria: the narrative had to be first hand and authentic; the style and content of the material had to be of interest to the present day reader; finally, since rare items of range lore are not often available to the average reader, Mr. Adams puts prime emphasis on the inclusion of these.

The editor has evenly divided his volume into three categories: the Cowboy, the Range and the Trail. Of the twenty-seven chapters in these three divisions, eight are by Britons, again underscoring the English, Scottish and Irish influence on the cattle industry.

Always, an anthologist has a hazardous occupation; the very nature of his task demands that he be selective, virtually assuring the omission of someone's favorite opus. Perhaps a list of "discards" at the end of each anthology would be in order! However, this reviewer feels that Ramon Adams did a singularly good job of selecting excerpts which conformed to his criteria. One may reasonably conjecture that many readers will peruse for the first time such authors as: Tom Candy Ponting, James Cox and Peter Wright. Herein resides the chief justification for another book on the cowboy!

*Gene M. Gressly is the University of Wyoming Archivist.*

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EMPIRE OF THE COLUMBIA. By Dorothy O. Johansen and Charles M. Gates. Harper and Brothers. 1957. Pp. xv, 666, index. \$8.

*Reviewed by Arthur L. Throckmorton  
Lewis and Clark College*

This book meets a long standing need for a sound and authoritative history of the Pacific Northwest extending beyond the pioneer period. The authors have divided the task of writing equally, with each contributing approximately one-half the text. Professor Johansen treats the early history of the region in two parts, and Professor Gates, that from 1880 to the present, also in two parts.

The book demonstrates the region's unity while recognizing the diversity within it and the distinct contributions of its several geographic provinces. "History is here a unifying theme which includes the present states of Oregon, Washington and Idaho," the authors declare. A second major purpose is to show the relationship of the development of the region to the broader history of the nation. "We are convinced that regional history should not be provincial, but . . . a vehicle through which many national

problems can be studied at close range and so be better understood." As these aims are achieved, the reader sees the gradual breakdown of isolation and provincialism and realizes that the region's development has been, in fact, a part of the history of the United States.

Professor Johansen gives a brilliant new synthesis to the familiar themes of explorers, fur-traders, missionaries, and pioneers, as the region's beginnings are placed within the broader perspective of national and world history. She utilizes recently published source material to give the reader a fresh and more accurate interpretation than that in the earlier accounts. The chapters on exploration, the fur-trade, early international rivalry, and the first settlements are exceptionally well done.

Her synthesis weakens, in the judgment of this reviewer, only in the treatment of the later pioneer period. The brief allusions to the politics and diplomacy of the Oregon Question in the 1840's, for example, hardly do justice to the topic. The advance of the mining frontier also seems slighted. Nor is the thorough documentation, characteristic of the book as a whole, maintained in these later chapters. Norman Graebner's recent book on the diplomacy of the 1840's and Trimble's important work on the mining frontier are not cited.

The book has few other defects. While it lacks a bibliography, it is for the most part adequately documented with footnotes. A few errors are worth noting, however. It was J. Quinn Thornton and not Samuel Thurston (p. 287) who was sent by Abernethy on a mission to Washington on the eve of the Cayuse War in 1847. Portland's population in 1860 was 2,917 and not 821 (p. 343), the latter being the correct figure for 1850. Also the name for the town of Milwaukie is consistently misspelled and appears "Milwau-kee" in several places in the book.

Professor Gates virtually breaks new ground for the period since 1880. He utilizes with great skill a mass of published and unpublished reports and data from a variety of private, municipal, state, and Federal agencies, as well as the scholar-





ship of the other social sciences to construct the recent history of the region. Quite properly the main focus of Professor Gates' narrative is economic development. Here, in fifteen of his twenty chapters, unfolds the story of railroads; the rise and growth of industries; commerce; agriculture; the sudden appearance of metropolitan centers; problems of resource development, and of labor and management; irrigation; reclamation; and hydroelectric power. These themes and the many knotty economic problems associated with them are presented in highly readable form and provide ample grist for the student or specialist seeking a comprehensive understanding of the region's recent development.

The bordering areas, particularly Montana and British Columbia, are considered only as their development falls into the main stream of the region's history. Professor Gates includes an excellent survey of the rise and growth of copper mining in Montana, with its attendant problems of labor and industrial management.

Although the book emphasizes economic development, it does not lose its balance. Both authors contribute well-written chapters on the politics and cultural growth of the three states, nicely interspersed among the chapters on purely economic themes. The book ends with a superb appraisal of the region's cultural gains by mid-twentieth century, when, as Professor Gates believes, "the Pacific Northwest was one with the nation as never before," with its former isolation largely destroyed.

Although well suited for the purpose, the stigma of "textbook" should not be attached to this able work. Rather it is a significant addition to the literature of American history. It is far superior to any book of similar scope on the Pacific Northwest yet to appear.

## IS THE "WEST" A "STATE OF MIND"?

"One hears about the country changing and attributes it to the automobile, the end of the horse, and the open range—and every so often the Rotary Club stages a 'Go Western Day' replete with insurance salesmen in big hats and genuine Gene Autry rayon shirts, and it's pretty pitiful," according to Dan Cushman who writes about the silver miners and the rise of mining moguls in his new book "The Silver Mountain." "The west wasn't an item of methods, or costuming," says Mr. Cushman. "It was a state of mind."

"My earliest recollections, I believe, were of Virginia, Minn., an iron-mining town then in the process of sensational growth," the author of "Stay Away Joe," a Book-of-the-Month Club Selection, and "The Old Copper Collar," says. "My father had a great fondness for boom towns. He spent most of his life going from one to another expecting to get rich, in the lumber woods of Michigan's Muskegon River where his father had settled after the timber of Maine's Penobscot commenced to play out.

"I recall with nostalgia the little, old-time Montana cow town of Box Elder. At the time, my father had set up a barber chair in the back of a saloon. Let me dwell on the saloon because I think it affected me more than anything else in my background. It was really a wonderful place. In winter it was the warmest spot in town. In the summer it was long, dim and cool. Almost always there would be a couple of card-playing opportunists sitting around, talking about far-off glamorous places such as Denver, Goldfield, Nome or Kansas City, of big poker games, boxing and baseball, violence and women. It was good he-man talk.

"I have been in many saloons since," the author adds, "but they don't sound the same any more. The easy assumption is that I have changed. I do not believe this is true. I think the country has changed, because every so often, in some little back-gulch mining town, I happen inside a saloon and briefly it is all there again."



The ideas set forth by Professors Webb, Kraenzel, Schlebecker, and Athearn are apt to stir controversy, especially in those circles (on both ends of the political spectrum) dedicated to stereotyped thinking. We anticipate a considerable emotional response to the articles because the West is emotional about the West and because both Professors Webb and Kraenzel have provided vehicles for those who wish to blast off on their own favorite concepts concerning the "status quo," "states' rights," "federal encroachment" and probably even Sputnik.

The attitude of this magazine is simply this: There is a Great Plains problem which neither wishful thinking nor belligerent chauvinism will mitigate. Professors Webb and Kraenzel have spent years of their lives in intensive study of the area—one from an historical, the other from a sociological point of view. Both have written voluminously and well on the subject. What they have to say deserves the careful attention of any Westerner seriously interested in the land in which he lives.

This magazine has space limitations. We cannot set forth the whole problem and the many suggested solutions in one issue, or for that matter, in four. So, if you are angered, challenged, confused or just curious about the subject, may I suggest that you read Professor Webb's book *The Great Plains* (Houghton-Mifflin) along with his article in the May issue of *Harper's Magazine* entitled "The American West: Perpetual Mirage." If you are still aboard you might then read his *Divided We Stand* (The Acorn Press) and *The Great Frontier* (Houghton-Mifflin).

Then you should read Professor Kraenzel's recent *The Great Plains In Transition*, as well as an essay which appears in a new book (Both Oklahoma University Press) entitled *Cultural Leadership In The Great Plains*. The essay is entitled "A Great Plains Institute: Method and Aims." There are a lot of other revealing works on the West, such as A. G. Mezerik's *The Revolt of the South and West* (Duell, Sloan and Pearce) and R. B. West's *Rocky Mountain Cities* (W. N. Norton).

The point is that the Great Plains problem (and to some extent it is the whole trans-Mississippi West's problem) has been challengingly and thoughtfully set forth again and again. The trouble is that nobody seems to pay much attention to the whole business. As Professor Kraenzel points out in this issue, the region itself is voiceless.

Now, with legislation pending in Senate Bill No. 2908, which was discussed in the last issue of this magazine and a digest of which appears in this issue, maybe the region will test a few of its rusty vocal cords.

We will provide any interested person with a copy of Senator Carroll's bill. I don't know whether it is the best of all possible bills or whether it will be challenged as a sinister attempt to "socialize" the Plains. But I think that canned concepts ought to be set aside for the moment and that this proposal should be given serious and objective consideration. The region is demonstrably exploited and the East suffers as well as the West as a consequence. I don't think that any serious endeavor to do something concrete

about it should be met either with apathy or with political cliches that had their origin in the Nineteenth Century.

Certainly, this will cost some money. Certainly, the proposal comes when Sputnik has just scared us to death and caused a loosening of defense purse strings. But if we can afford billions for foreign aid, how about \$7,500,000 to do something about a sickness in what, in many respects, is the heart of our nation? In the long run, it might be wiser to give a little foreign aid to the Great Plains even if we have to bleed it away from Tito's quota.

In a way Foreign Aid for the Great Plains is rather appropriate. It could be granted under the category of aid to a satellite.



TERRIBLE THIRST, heritage of the Old West.

by Lucius Beebe.

The two great legends of American romance have been shadowy and ill defined, almost ineffable in wistfulness. They are, of course, the Old South, and the Old West.

The Old South, in the average American's mind, runs to a hazy but compelling synthesis of the politics of John C. Calhoun, cape jasmine, obsequious darky butlers, hoop-skirts, mint juleps and silk hatted gentlemen meeting at dawn under the Duelling Oaks.

The Old West is better defined in the general concept because it lasted longer and there are vestigial, aye tangible traces to be touched and experienced. "San Francisco," the late Bernard De Voto was fond of saying, "San Francisco, stranger,

is west as all hell." So are parts of Nevada, Montana, Utah and New Mexico. Colorado was west as long as Spencer Penrose was alive, but it has been manicured by real estate promoters, mean little suburbs of mean little houses, the Air Force and other agencies of simple, unadulterated satanism.

It took three men to create the Old West as it will exist forever in the American legend. They were not William F. Cody or George Armstrong Custer or even Jim Bridger, James J. Hill, Uncle Dick Wootton or Wyatt Earp, although these helped. They were Theodore Roosevelt, Owen Wister and Frederic Remington. These were the men who brought the Old West into focus for the rest of the United States and shaped it in the image that will endure forever.

Of all the devisings of human genius that evolved the white man's West, whiskey was immeasurably the most powerful—surpassing even the thorough braced Concord coach and Sam Colt's patent revolving pistol. Civilization flowed out of the Atlantic states and across the Alleghenies on a gentle tide of the dew of Kentucky. By the time it reached the cow towns of Kansas it had achieved flood proportions. The campaigns of the Mexican War were floated on strong waters. Distilled spirits implemented Manifest Destiny to a greater extent than any agency imagined by most people today. Whiskey was in the ink of the frontier newspaper and lubricated the valve gear of the first teapot locomotives that snorted across the Great Plains. Whiskey in the Old West was not merely a universal property, it was an element and a dimension, its use and consumption the supreme fact of life itself.

[Lucius Beebe, energetic editor of the *TERRITORIAL ENTERPRISE AND VIRGINIA CITY (Nevada) NEWS* in his epic *Sunny Brook* issue of August 16, 1957, issued this unintended, perhaps abstract appraisal of the Desert Theory of the Old West. Something had to cut the harsh dust in the throats of thirsty, sweaty he-men. Whiskey certainly did not make the desert bloom—but it did, indeed, brighten the mirage.]





*The First Furrow, by Charles M. Russell.*

**NEW FRONTISPIECE, PAGE ONE . . .** This provocative 1958 masthead is from the mural painting by Henry Meloy, for the U.S. Post Office at Hamilton, Montana. It depicts Flathead braves, from their camp near historic Como Peaks, about to depart for possible battle against marauding Blackfeet who have invaded the western valleys, ostensibly on a horse-raiding mission. The white man is a North West Company trader, which dates the period as shortly after the Lewis and Clark Expedition, or about 1810. Credit: Peter Meloy, Helena, Montana.

**BACK COVER . . .** East and south, along and beyond the beautiful blue expanse of massive (40 by 10 miles) Flathead Lake, in the historic country of the Flathead and Kootenai Indians, is the massive barrier of the Swan and Mission Ranges. A portion of McDonald Glacier, near the top of 9,800 feet Mount McDonald, feeds the trout-filled lake of the same name glimpsed here in sparkling summer sunshine. This fine kodachrome photo study is the work of an able Montana professional, Ernst Peterson, Hamilton, Montana.

#### PERSONALS

**WANTED**—All back issues of Vols. 1, 2 and 3 of this magazine, "Northwest" trade guns with dragon side-plate. Ray Russell, 527 Harrison, Rochester, Michigan.

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